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Sebastian Carl DETTMAN
Singapore Management University, sdettman@smu.edu.sg

Meredith L. WEISS

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Has Patronage Lost Its Punch in Malaysia?

Sebastian Dettman [a] and Meredith L. Weiss [b]

a Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA;

b Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Rockefeller College of Public Affairs & Policy, University at Albany, State University of New York, Albany, NY, USA

ORCID

Sebastian Dettman http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2970-5592

Meredith L. Weiss http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2667-9571

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Abstract

The personalistic linkages that generally define Malaysian politics come into sharp relief when candidates confront the imperative of winning office. Malaysia's 14th general election (GE14), as other previous iterations, saw politicians emphasize their 'personal touch' and offer a barrage of targeted promises. Yet these relationships are not confined to elections and reflect deep connections between voters and politicians – not only for politicians in the long-dominant Barisan Nasional coalition, but also for the newly victorious Pakatan Harapan parties. The authors of this article draw on original survey data to show the embeddedness of these relationships beyond elections. In GE14, the Pakatan coalition could bank on their experience in power, as well as present a broad, economics-oriented campaign that was able to reassure voters that they would not lose out on the personal attention and material benefits they had come to expect from their politicians. As such, personalistic politics will, in the view of the authors, probably survive the transition in government.

Keywords

Malaysia's GE14, party–voter linkages, clientelism, patronage, elections, electoral transitions

Introduction

Malaysia's 14th general election (GE14), held on 9 May 2018, marked a decisive shift in the country's electoral balance of power. For the first time, the long-dominant National Front (Barisan Nasional, BN), spearheaded by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), lost its majority at the federal level and a new ruling coalition, the Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan, PH), took its place. Multiple factors account for BN's defeat and PH's surprising win. Especially key were incumbent Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak's ensnarement in a massive corruption scandal that amplified persistent economic worries, and a reconfigured opposition coalition's embracing as leader the ultimate regime-insider-turned-opponent, Mahathir Mohamad. Still, BN remained optimistic that it could win, aided by partisan delimitation of constituencies[1] and an apparent multi-corner agreement with the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam seMalaysia, PAS) playing spoiler against PH.

As the campaign proceeded, BN retained a tight grip on state resources. As usual, its campaign appeals were centred on promises of large-scale infrastructure projects, coupled with more immediate, generally smaller-scale 'goodies', which could never be matched by the opposition parties. As such, voters swayed by such patronage had incentive to stick with BN rather than toying with a new alternative. Yet, this time, BN lost.

This article examines relationships among voters, parties, and politicians in the context of this puzzling outcome, arguing that BN's loss does not signal that political loyalties generated through patronage (the use of public resources for private benefits) or clientelism (reciprocal relationships between politicians and voters predicated on the exchange of goods for political support) are now unimportant or radically changed. Rather, we argue that all parties relied on elected office to mediate access to resources and generate political loyalty among their constituents. Building its own clientelistic relationships allowed PH to compete better with BN's real and promised benefits, augmenting PH's more distinct normative appeals. The cultivation of personalized support through affective ties serves not only to transmit public benefits to private actors – a classic form of patronage – but also to reinforce the distinction between clientelist networks and material patronage.[2]

PH's ability to create and maintain these relationships prior to 2018 was constrained, given both the geographic concentration of its legislators and its limited access to state resources. The BN also relied more heavily on patronage strategies than did PH, in an election substantially centred around allegations of rank corruption and the related clash of titans as Mahathir sided with one-time heir-apparent, then foe, Anwar Ibrahim to take on another erstwhile protégé, Najib. But we propose that PH's ability to cultivate these relationships was important in two ways: both to cement the loyalties of voters who would face competing offers by an incumbent federal government eager to recover lost state-level ground, and as a 'demonstration effect' to reassure voters of their representatives' diligent attention, including the prospect of further benefits, should PH win national power.

Notwithstanding the alteration in power they effected, the elections reaffirm the salience of an established mode of personalized politics in Malaysia, in which politicians cultivate direct relationships and distribute goods as well as services to constituents to secure political support. Our research in the previous years and during the election indicates that the opposition parties in PH (and its forerunner from 2008 to 2015, People's Alliance or Pakatan Rakyat) had long since begun cultivating links with voters that helped make real their promises to keep both state aid and more personal support available to citizens.

To examine these dynamics, we present original evidence from a 2016 survey in Malaysia[3] that investigates how BN and PH legislators built relationships with constituents, and citizens' concomitant attitudes and behaviours. We focus on how PH, in opposition, sought to reproduce scaled-down approximations of the politician–voter linkages BN had cultivated for decades.[4] While BN could implicitly or explicitly sanction voters who did not return their support, PH parties aimed to generate 'feelings of obligation'[5] among recipients that would translate into political loyalty, thus blurring the line between constituency service and clientelism.

Toward these ends, we first review the literature on politician–citizen linkages and their manifestations in Malaysia. We then draw on evidence from the survey to drill down into the dynamics undergirding

relationships between politicians and parties with citizens, before considering the extent to which past praxis changed or continued in the 2018 election. In the final section, we consider the consequences of incumbent turnover for these relationships and speculate on what we might see over the next several years, as PH and BN adapt to their changed fortunes and prepare to contest anew.

Understanding Politician–Voter Linkages

Central to this inquiry is the notion of linkages, or 'the grounds on which politicians are accountable and responsive to citizens' (p. 845) – whether based on charisma (personal style, symbols, and gestures), programmatic promises (policies that distribute costs and benefits among citizens regardless of vote-choice), or clientelism (particularistic connections).[6] In any polity, we may see a mix of forms (from a party's 'portfolio' of micro-targeted and collective goods[7] to how different voters relate to their elected officials), although one mode may predominate. For instance, where clientelist linkages are salient, we expect to see politicians relying heavily on targeted benefits delivered via personal networks; even voters excluded from those networks, though, may support a politician for specific policies in their party's manifesto. Potentially more durable than charismatic linkages, clientelist ones tend to be less preferred from a normative standpoint than programmatic linkages, since they do less to encourage efficient state outputs.

Definitions of clientelism are persistently inconsistent, with applications to a wide variety of political, 'problem-solving', or power relationships.[8] The literature on clientelism in Southeast Asia specifically invokes a long-established focus on patron–client ties. Its core is a network of interlinked, hierarchically structured, face-to-face, reciprocal, enduring pairs, dating back to relationships between landlords and tenants or sharecroppers, with sociological implications extending well beyond politics and elections, which is our focus here. Each member of a dyad supplies something the other needs and cannot independently acquire. Where clientelist linkages predominate, such direct, essentially symbiotic, personal relationships remain more central to political organization than ideological, class, or organizational ties.[9]

In elections, clientelist linkages foreground informal institutions within the democratic process and render elusive the ideal of responsible party government, in which alignment of policy preferences determines electoral support and post-election priorities. Rather, democratic accountability rests less on overall progress towards promises of economic growth, social welfare, or other public goods, but more on exchange of votes for payments or particularistic benefits, even as direct local-community ties scale up to become increasingly symmetrical, intermittent, instrumental-rational, and broker-mediated.[10] [11] in voting behaviour – politicians' brokers still monitor compliance.[12] Notably, clientelistic strategies are possible not only for ruling parties, but also for non-government parties that may substitute private funding (or use limited access to state resources) to build these relationships.[13]

Patronage[14] often reinforces clientelist linkages. Hence, for instance, we have the paradox of reform that Ellen Lust describes in the Middle East: incumbent members of parliament (MPs) resist turning against authoritarian regimes lest they lose access to what state resources they have. Such 'competitive clientelism' produces expectations and incentives that make legislative elections more about distributing patronage among elites for distribution downwards among their clients than about pressing for liberalization.[15] If what is being traded for votes, though, are public goods – those from which no one can be excluded except per documented, non-discretionary (and actually followed) criteria – the relationship at stake is necessarily programmatic, not clientelistic.[16]

In contemporary praxis, clientelist linkages may be less often face-to-face, but they nevertheless persist. In Ghana, for instance, despite a strongly institutionalized parliamentary system, citizens hold MPs accountable for personal assistance and community development. MPs spend much of their time distributing private (or collective club) goods or performing community service, leaving little time for legislating or exercising executive oversight.[17] Afrobarometer data suggest that African voters understand how unlikely it is for MPs or their intermediaries to personally bestow benefits upon more than a fraction of the constituency, and most grasp the greater utility they derive from wider-scale development projects than sporadic handouts. But MPs still need to show themselves to be present in the community and looking out for the constituency.[18]

Exceeding ‘normal’ community service, legislators across varied regime and economic contexts, particularly where electoral rules or backbencher status encourage a personal vote, spend copious time interacting directly with constituents, cultivating appealing mannerisms, and investing in outreach. This happens even where parties are strong or when the direct electoral benefit of such networking and service-provision is uncertain, driven by pay-off in opportunity for credit-claiming, including for programmatic policies, and reputation-building through personal ties.[19]

Clientelist linkages are not all bad, however obvious the negatives. Emphasizing private and club rather than public goods fosters inefficiency and imbalance in goods supplied and perpetuates informal institutions and incumbency advantage, marginalizing formal institutions better tuned to maximizing representation, accountability, and systemic oversight. It may also cultivate short time-horizons for voters or politicians, dependency on discretionary public resources, bloated public-sector budgets, corruption, and exclusive rather than inclusive policy-making, given politicians’ need to demonstrate special attention. Yet clientelism may also encourage responsiveness, direct accountability, and useful redistribution, and gives citizens a path to secure benefits from the state, including where formal institutions for social welfare fall short.[20]

Politician–Voter Linkages in Malaysia

Malaysia is unique in the region for its strong parties both in government and opposition. Even so, Malaysian political praxis has always combined clientelism with ideological messaging and programmatic promises. Its personalized dimension has perversely become more rather than less endemic over time. Central to building and sustaining support, across all parties, is what is known ubiquitously in Malaysia as the ‘personal touch’, or ‘going to the ground’ to demonstrate presence and concern, blurring the line between constituency service in democratic contexts and clientelist linkages. Unsurprisingly, this tendency towards such linkages also encourages distribution of patronage, more often in the form of contingent club goods than individually pitched private goods.

Yet two important distinctions have applied until now, across both the recipients of particularistic benefits and the parties that dispense them. That power has now changed hands will surely temper these patterns, though to some extent the key players might simply change places.

First, the *content* of particularistic relationships and their potential welfare implications for citizens have varied considerably across parties. The BN has been able to use its position to promise, and to deliver, everything from roads to schools to massive development projects in exchange for political support. Some such projects are BN’s writ large, distributed contingently on geographic or identity basis. Others track a particular component party, being pitched to the relevant ethnic community, under BN’s largely communal coalition framework. Many tread the line between programmatic and clientelistic – but tilt towards the latter when a project’s siting is clearly political or a politician expressly expects reciprocation. Until now, BN had been able to follow through on implied or explicit threats of denying non-supporters access to development funds, infrastructure, and other economic opportunities, making clear the exchange relationship involved. For instance, in this election Najib promised residents of the public-housing flats surrounding a rally venue that if BN won they could purchase their homes – and the bigger the win, the better the price. He was explicit: ‘I won’t forget you; don’t forget me’.[21] In other words, BN has operated per a classic style of political clientelism, filtering even programmatic policies through a discretionary screen.

Malaysia’s opposition parties have historically been closed off from access to public resources.[22] Nevertheless, their campaign promises have, in part, rivalled BN’s for targeted club goods. But crucially, these promises have been predicated on the parties’ being elected to office, preferably at the federal level, and have lacked BN’s credible threat of punishing defectors. As such, pledges have tended to be programmatic, however pitched towards demarcated groups. Meanwhile, opposition politicians in state and federal legislative office could build ties with potential supporters through ostensibly programmatic state-level welfare schemes via strategic brokerage and credit-claiming, or help individuals navigate the bureaucracy, or offer other forms of intermediation. Such personalized assistance may generate ‘feelings of obligation’ even without credible

threat of monitoring or penalizing failure to reciprocate.[23] [24] They emphasized constituency service more than payments, permitting retrospective yet personalistic voting.[25]

The second issue is that of political and socio-economic *context*. Despite heavy use of clientelistic inducements, Malaysia provides relatively well-institutionalized and programmatically delivered health care, education, infrastructure, and other government programmes. Personalistic aspects thus coexist with relatively universal benefits – yet they still pre-empt more democratic practice. The personalized nature of Malaysian politics reflects and entrenches illiberal governing institutions and practices. Malaysian citizens have limited electoral choice, voting only for two levels of parliamentary government – state and national legislatures[26] – at five-year intervals. Until 2018, federal power had never changed hands, limiting the extent to which elections served as a valid measure of either prospective or retrospective support. Moreover, federal legislators meet for no more than a few months – and only weeks for state lawmakers – each year, and spend little of their time on policy-making, nor do parliamentary structures or resources facilitate a policy-making focus. Even campaign periods are abbreviated, presenting little chance for voters to absorb extensive information about candidates' or parties' policy positions. These institutions both reflect and entrench a political culture that downplays programmatic outputs through politically neutral institutions.

Instead, intensive personal relationships between citizens and politicians have acted as substitutes for responsiveness via elections and responsible party government. Citizens with limited chance to hold their government responsible for policies and promises could still demand that their individual legislators do their best for their districts. Ongoing interaction between constituents and politicians reinforces affective ties, but also makes it easier for the latter to meet citizens' practical needs and build bonds of gratitude in the process, whether or not state aid is unavailable or simply cannot be channelled in such a way that the legislator can claim credit for it.

Economically, despite Malaysia's performing well based on national economic indicators, many citizens experience pervasive economic uncertainty. A majority – 56% – of Malaysian respondents to the 2014 Asian Barometer Survey said they were 'very concerned' about the loss of their or their family's major source of income in the next year. Thirty-three per cent identified inflation as the most important problem facing the country.[27] Similarly, polled several months before the 2018 election, 40% of respondents reported being unable to pay bills on time and 64% felt 'stressed about the future'.[28] Even token handouts may thus have tangible impact. Moreover, simply signalling credibly that a politician, if elected, will help a constituent access available benefits, regardless of the party responsible for the programmes in question, may reassure those voters who think in instrumental, prospective terms, while also allowing retrospective assessment of aid proffered to date.

Base-building between Elections

What most clearly reveals the salience of clientelist linkages in Malaysia is the extent to which Malaysia's state legislators (known as *Ahli Dewan Undangan Negeri*, ADUN) and federal MPs constantly embed themselves in the lives of their constituents. To explore the extent and forms of such patterns, we draw from a telephone survey in June 2016 done by independent pollster Merdeka Centre, and where possible corroborate its findings with additional evidence gathered from interviews, news sources, and legislators' reports of expenditures. These data suggest that the relationships at issue follow a classic clientelistic pattern in their mutuality, hierarchy, and iteration, plus an exchange aspect that comes out most clearly at elections, when citizens can reciprocate support with their votes.

The survey shows that Malaysia's elected representatives are remarkably present in the lives of their constituents. Almost half (46%) of respondents reported having met their MP or ADUN at least once in the past year. Twenty per cent reported that an elected representative had attended a wedding, funeral, religious ceremony, or open house (common in Malaysia for celebrating religious and other festivals) in their household. Although these representatives often came bearing gifts – 46% reported receiving a gift when the representative visited – our interviews with state and federal legislators from the gamut of political parties indicate that those gifts are generally funded out-of-pocket and essentially pro forma, ranging from RM10 to

around RM200, per the giver's means and status. Sixteen per cent of the total sample reported having requested some form of assistance (for instance, with jobs, money, or letters of support for schools, scholarships, or agencies) from an elected representative or political party in the past year.

To facilitate outreach, nearly all politicians, in office or aspiring to be, establish service centres as key sites for outreach and interaction. Two-thirds of our survey respondents knew where their ADUN's or MP's nearest service centre was. Legislators with constituency-development funds (termed 'allocations') generally finance both their service centre costs (site rental, staff salaries, etc.) and grants or materials provided from those public funds. BN federal and state governments have not given opposition legislators allocations, however, channelling them instead to unelected BN *penyelaras* (coordinators) in those constituencies.

This practice adds a level of contingency to mundane outlays of public resources. Although opposition legislators may fundraise to afford some similar dispensations, only voters in BN parliamentary constituencies or under BN state representatives in BN-held states have typically been able to access public resources to support community festivities, local infrastructure projects, and so forth – for which the politician, of course, claims credit. That PH-held state governments have replicated this selective grant of allocations, albeit conceding non-PH state representatives token allotments, raised immediate questions about whether the new PH federal government would maintain or change this patronage-oriented approach. We return to this issue later.

Concrete, accessible data on how elected officials spend their allocations are limited, but PH state representatives in PH-held states have moved towards more transparent documentation. One such source of data is People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR) MP Wong Chen, who holds the Subang (formerly Kelana Jaya) seat in the state of Selangor. In 2017, Wong posted on his website the exact details of how he dispersed funds in 2015. Of his total budget of RM383,000, he gave 80% as direct payments to constituents, non-governmental organizations, schools, and community organizations. Almost half (49%) of that expenditure consisted of direct cash donations to constituents, in amounts ranging from RM150 to RM2500. His office details their extensive 'welfare month' distributions over social media. Many constituents received payments in successive years (23% in both 2014 and 2015). Our interviews with several dozen PH legislators confirm the general pattern this one MP's record suggests, of giving generally small payments to many recipients, both individuals and groups. While some PH legislators have prioritized household or individual welfare payments to supplement or stand in for state support, others have emphasized signature infrastructure investments such as community parks or playgrounds, or have divvied up much of their available funds for small, generally equal grants to local religious and cultural organizations that expected donations and could count on receiving them from BN.

The amounts that opposition legislators could use towards these essentially goodwill payments to reinforce clientelist ties with material patronage were, however, dwarfed by those of BN legislators. Under Najib, BN parliamentarians' annual allocations increased from RM1 million to RM5 million by 2015, before edging up even further;[29] moreover, BN legislators noted in our interviews with them that they could request additional funds as needed. Indeed, these interviews revealed at least two odd quirks to which the availability of such supplemental resources gave rise. First, few BN legislators were able to tell us how much their exact allocations were – they were not unwilling, but unsure; and second, BN state representatives in PH-held states confidently rejected partial allocations, when offered, knowing that their party would provide adequately. (Officially, they claimed to be insulted at being granted less than their PH counterparts, even though their coalition denied opposition legislators any allocation at all.[30]) Indeed, even PH state representatives in Penang and Selangor, granted full and increasing state allocations, could not rival the resources available to their BN colleagues. BN component parties' substantial business ventures and access to rents left them far wealthier than those in PH and hence able to support their legislators, even apart from as-needed project funds from federal agencies.

Whether because they have been led to expect such localized support, or whether their requests initiated this pattern, Malaysian voters prioritize community service among legislators' roles. The share of our respondents who ranked 'law-making' highest among what they wanted their MPs to be doing was essentially nil (under

0.5%) and legislating did not feature at all among what our respondents thought should be ADUNs' most important responsibility. Moreover, 31% of respondents felt that MPs should be responsible just to their own constituency, rather than to the nation as a whole.

Yet, however locally-oriented, citizens' priorities do not entirely centre around material demands. The same proportion that had requested direct assistance had had some proactive contact with elected officials over local issues. Sixteen per cent of our sample reported having contacted their representatives to solve neighbourhood problems – although a greater share, 22%, had contacted a government agency about such concerns. Moreover, even if they expected their elected officials to prioritize community service, not legislating, our respondents claimed that agreement with elected representatives' policy preferences and platforms was important to them, more so than having representatives of their same ethnic or religious identity.

Still, both our survey and interviews suggest ethnic and class distinctions. Notably, even though Chinese-based parties had come to increase their focus on local-level engagement by the early 1990s, including both service-delivery and brokering access to government agencies,[31] our findings show Malay respondents to be more likely to have made, and to privilege, these personal connections than were ethnic-Chinese respondents. Elected representatives, too, visit different events in line with ethnicity. For instance, Indian survey respondents reported that their representatives had attended funerals, while Chinese respondents reported representatives going to open houses. Malay legislators, or those with significantly Malay electorates, recounted attending endless constituents' weddings, portraying those visits as especially characteristic of the community. Other community outreach centres around religious and cultural festivals such as the Hindu Ponggal festival, Chinese New Year, and meals at dawn and dusk throughout the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. On the voters' part, ethnic-Chinese respondents were the most likely never to have met with their MP; ethnic Indians reported the highest incidence of having contacted a legislator at least once, followed by Muslim Bumiputera in East Malaysia, then Malays. In line with literature suggesting the greater pull of patronage among poorer voters, 41% of respondents with household monthly incomes under RM2000 said they had met with their MP at least once, versus around 10% less in all other income brackets.

Importantly, we note only minor differences between constituent experiences in parliamentary seats held by opposition or BN legislators – less of a divergence than one might expect, if the purpose of these interactions was purely to give and receive patronage, given the parties' vastly unequal resources. Thirty-one per cent of respondents in PH constituencies had met their MP, compared with 38% of those under BN. But suggesting that patronage is still significant, 18% of respondents in BN constituencies had asked their representatives for some form of assistance, versus 12% under PH. As Table 1 indicates, the most common requests were essentially resource-neutral – and our interviews indicate that even opposition legislators do feel their letters of support and similar interventions carry weight with bureaucrats. For more concrete assistance such as money and jobs, BN representatives would have an advantage, offering a plausible explanation for the higher share of requests they field.[32]

Those who did ask elected representatives or political parties for help were remarkably successful, as Table 2 shows; opposition as well as BN legislators often met these demands. (Importantly for comparative reference, jobs are the least-commonly granted request – despite the fact that some scholars define patronage exclusively as distribution of public-sector jobs, contingent upon political support.[33] The civil service is almost entirely under federal control,[34] so only BN could reasonably hope to grant more than a handful of such requests.)

Table 1. Types of assistance, by category (among those reporting requesting assistance).

Type of assistance	Per cent requesting
A letter of support (e.g. for school admission/transfer)	43
Assistance with paperwork (e.g. for a permit or government agency)	21
Money, as a gift	16
Medical care (e.g. from a mobile clinic, funds for an operation)	14
Non-monetary gifts, such as food or medicine	11
A job	10
Help paying a bill	5
Assistance in securing a contract	5
Legal aid	5
Money, as a loan	4

N = 174 (16% of the full sample).

Table 2. Successfully received assistance, by category (among those requesting assistance).

Type of assistance	Per cent receiving
Non-monetary gifts, such as food or medicine	90
A letter of support	84
Medical care	76
Assistance in securing a contract	72
Assistance with paperwork	68
Help paying a bill	63
Money, as a gift	63
Legal aid	63
Money, as a loan	57
A job	47

N = 174.

Table 3. Sources of assistance.

Elected representative (ADUN/MP) or their coordinator	46%
Local councillor, *ketua kampung* (village head), JKKK (Village Development & Security Committee[a])	24%
Party office/service centre	21%

[a]These government-appointed committees primarily assist ADUNs with local-level monitoring and outreach. (Village heads are also government appointees – usually the head of the local ruling-party branch.) See Hunter (2013).
N = 174.

Furthermore, in line with our findings regarding what efforts citizens prioritize among elected representatives, and reflecting the unaccountable nature of unelected local governments, nearly twice as many supplicants appeal at the level of the ADUN or MP than to local-level officials at the municipal or village level, as Table 3 details.[35]

These survey data, which qualitative findings from our interviews and observations confirm, suggest that patronage and clientelistic ties, including personalized connections between legislators and constituents, are important to understand how citizens access (and politicians mediate access to) state institutions and resources. They feature prominently in Malaysian elections as a *continuation* of ties already forged in repeated interactions. As we consider next, part of the opposition's increased appeal in 2018 was surely this tangible evidence that it could provide for citizens. Although no one strategy or form of politician–voter linkage dominates completely, that PH as well as BN legislators maintain clientelist linkages and deploy patronage-

based tactics should temper our expectations for a definitive programmatic turn following the recent change in government.

The 2018 Election

On the surface, the 2018 election featured a familiar litany of promises of infrastructure development and targeted policies. While the grandest of these appeals were on BN's side, given its control of federal coffers, PH also reassured voters that they would not lose out by switching sides.

Central to BN's campaign strategy was an expansionary federal budget. The final 'election budget' in October 2017 promised additional financial assistance, both subsidies and local-development projects, to core Malay constituencies, including rural farmers and fishers, current and retired civil servants, and lower-income groups. It also lowered already minimal income taxes for the middle class and introduced or expanded allowances or other benefits for everyone from the disabled and their caretakers, to new parents, to indigenous *orang asli* villagers, to non-Malay entrepreneurs and employees of government-linked corporations (GLCs). Presenting the budget to parliament, Najib described it as 'happy news that will put a smile on everyone's faces'.[36] Allocations for affordable housing, medical facilities, and more resurfaced during the campaign itself, as BN candidates promised specific constituencies projects should they win. The BN's unconditional cash-transfer scheme 1Malaysia People's Aid (Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia, BRIM), along with supplemental benefits for specific blocs (newlyweds, undergraduates, etc.), also featured in campaign advertisements and appeals, and Najib promised additional post-election payments.

Having governed Malaysia's two wealthiest states, Selangor and Penang, for a decade, PH could now broadcast its success not only in advancing economic growth and better governance, but also in distributing benefits such as free water and shuttle-buses. Moreover, both states had their own, state-level unconditional cash-transfer programmes, offering subsidies for students, the bereaved, the poor, seniors, and other categories.[37] PH's Democratic Action Party (DAP) and PKR had also engaged in outreach programmes in Sabah and Sarawak starting long before elections, offering collaboratively built, small-scale infrastructure projects such as solar power, roads, and piped water. As interviewees from both parties explained, their approach aimed not just to build credibility as providers – these necessarily-limited initiatives planted the notion that if PH had access to federal resources, they would do much more – but also as being more approachable and concerned than the yet-to-deliver BN.

Both sides thus ran on overall economic progress as well as selective benefits for key groups, including programmatic promises given a contingent particularistic spin, and both could count on a degree of favourable retrospective economic voting plus prospective evaluation of promises now on the table. (A related issue, beyond the scope of this article, is affirmative action: that PH had added a Malay-based communal party, the Malaysian United Indigenous Party [Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, Bersatu], led by Mahathir, to reassure Malay voters that voting PH would not put an end to Bumiputera privileges.) The mix of appeals meant that otherwise change-seeking voters did not need to fear losing particularistic benefits for supporting PH, even if PH's platform entailed a different mix of lures or temporary diminution of those benefits.

Rather, the backlash against corruption, and against Najib in particular, cast these respective appeals in a different light. PH argued in campaign speeches that BN could afford its programmes only through an unpopular goods and services tax (GST) and spending cuts elsewhere, eroding citizens' net gain. Even if PH promised less in their basket of 'goodies', then voters would still be better off: PH vowed to get rid of the GST and to restore subsidies and other supports for fuel, higher education, and other household expenses. Moreover, despite denigrating BR1M as 'political bribery'[38] even after its initial partisan bump had diminished,[39] PH came around. Its 2018 Alternative Budget[40] pledged to maintain BR1M, albeit adding mild conditionality.

Of course, supplementing these instrumental appeals were carefully cultivated personal networks: the service- and outreach-fed clientelist linkages both sides prioritized. That so many on the PH side were personally well known, with reputations for helping constituents, including across ethnic lines, helped to undercut BN's usual

efforts to frame the opposition as ideologically extreme, ethnically unrepresentative, and incredible.[41] BN-aligned media raised familiar tropes of the DAP as 'Chinese chauvinist', anti-Islam, insufficiently loyal to Malaysia's hereditary sultans, and so on. However, not only could the DAP note that it was contesting fewer seats than partner-party Bersatu, unequivocally backed Mahathir for prime-ministership, and featured noteworthy candidates from across ethnic categories, but also, ethnic-Chinese DAP leaders had convincing records on which to run. Those score-sheets highlighted minutely documented community outreach and service, as well as programmatic welfare policies, distribution of which aimed to assign clear credit to the politicians and party and to cultivate gratitude. What the DAP and the other parties in PH had been heretofore unable to provide in material terms, voters might thus assume, would now be possible – and without the corrosive effects of BN-level corruption and over-concentration of public resources in a few hands.

These relationships and reputations, however, clearly varied in timbre and salience among a wider set of issues that came to the fore in 2018. First, there was regional variation. Our interviews with legislators from PAS strongholds Kelantan (which it had ruled for the past 28 years) and Terengganu show the Islamist party had consistently reinforced its ideological appeals with personalized outreach. PH's limited party machinery in these north-eastern states, coupled with popular approval of PAS's record and messaging around clean Islamic-inspired governance, seemingly limited the power of PH's 'demonstration effect' there. As for Sabah and Sarawak, while PH's greater success cannot be directly attributed to its micro-infrastructure projects, which PH respondents expressed no expectation of having quick electoral effect given BN's larger counter-projects, these projects may still have reassured voters frustrated with unfulfilled BN promises.

Second, even strong patronage networks among ruling-party elites frayed as the 1Malaysia Development Berhad case was linked directly to Najib, his family, and his political allies, tethering UMNO to a highly public, massive corruption scandal. UMNO candidates and strategists, our interviews suggest, were aware of Najib's drag on the party's popularity and their need to respond better to PH jibes. Some struggled to frame local outreach and assistance as distinct from central-party initiatives, albeit unable openly to denounce their party leader, their own patron. Meanwhile, as a new opposition leader who embodied UMNO's own economic glory-days, Mahathir further curtailed BN room for manoeuvre, and may help account for PH's gains among state-dependent but economically distressed constituents, such as Federal Land Development Agency (FELDA) settlers and civil servants.

Will These Patterns Persist?

As shown, unlike one-time or episodic vote-buying in many other contexts, the material lures that marked GE14 punctuated enduring relationships between politicians and their constituents. Although BN rallied material power and the implicit or explicit threat of punishment to maintain its majorities, PH had both a track record this time to support credible counter-proposals and a compelling frame to discount BN offers. Now that the former opposition parties control the institutional apparatus, PH can either fortify painstakingly built relationships or rewrite them. While we are still in the early stages, the evidence leans towards continuity, at least in the short-to-medium term.

While material links to the electorate are democratically less than ideal, they are also extremely common in even developed democratic contexts. The issue for the PH government is whether or not it will lessen dependence on material links as substitutes for more genuinely democratic representation without implicitly threatening the withdrawal of such benefits. But this government has inherited the skewed institutions BN created over decades in power. The list of political reforms both the coalition itself and allies in civil society have proposed is daunting, ranging from restoring civil liberties to restructuring GLCs, reworking campaign finance laws, and reinstating local elections.

What then may help to spur a shift towards more programmatic linkages and encourage voters to weigh legislating and oversight? Having to prove itself before the next election, the PH government could seek institutional reforms in how legislators work, to draw less of their time and energy away from policy-making. Yet, among the new government's earliest decisions was that opposition MPs would receive only one-fifth of the annual allocation of PH parliamentarians[43] – an improvement over BN's zero, but still an indication that

the new government expects its MPs to use public resources to curry targeted support.[44] As BN did in the past, even if less starkly, PH is punishing constituencies who did not vote for them.

Among the factors that could help the PH government institute reforms is its key antagonists' disarray. The election spurred defections, reducing BN to its original three component parties, and UMNO's new leaders will face internal opposition. With now-limited access to federal resources and with control of only two state governments, BN will need to rethink how it connects with the electorate. (Already, the component Malaysian Chinese Association [MCA] has announced that it is shutting its service centres, for lack of funds and purpose.[45]) The time it takes BN to regroup and reorganize may allow PH a window of opportunity to institute reforms towards a more programmatic order, in line with much of the rest of its manifesto – since economic promises, while important, were hardly the whole picture, and offer less opportunity to distance its government from BN's model.

Moreover, evidence from elsewhere suggests clientelist voting may gradually diminish after democratization, given experience of competitive elections and longer track-records on which to evaluate candidates. Competition may drive parties to focus more on public goods than siphoning rents for private goods. Also, especially with politicians' encouragement, voters may come both to prioritize collective goods and MPs' legislative and oversight activities, and to have the information and retrospective experience to evaluate politicians on those terms.[46] Also potentially relevant to Malaysia are Ward Berenschot's findings for Indonesia, that lack of economic diversification and high dependence on the state, rather than more commonly cited factors of relative prosperity, urbanization, and middle-class strength, matter for the prevalence of clientelism.[47] Should PH succeed in revamping the sizeable government-linked share of the economy, we might then see lesser reliance on state support broadly, as well as less ample pools of patronage resources for any government to tap. Yet this refocusing may depend on whether PH leaders are willing to enact changes that could potentially undermine the electorally useful relationships they have built with voters.

These possibilities are speculative, at this point. PH has the opportunity to retool its linkages with constituents at ground level, the prevailing balance of particularistic and programmatic policies, and the state's role in the economy. We do not yet see convincing evidence that voters have rejected personalized politics and targeted benefits, even if they *also* value a cleaned-up administration and non-economic goals. Only time will tell what PH will make of its moment.

Notes

1. Ooi Kok Hin (2018) 'How Malaysia's election is being rigged', *New Narratif*, 19 March, https://newnaratif.com/research/malaysias-election-rigged/, accessed 16 November 2018.

2. Paul Hutchcroft (2014) 'Linking capital and countryside: patronage and clientelism in Japan, Thailand, and the Philippines', in D.A. Brun and L. Diamond (Eds), *Clientelism, Social Policy, and the Quality of Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 176–177.

3. Funding for the survey was from a Discovery Project grant from the Australian Research Council (DP140103114).

4. Given our focus on the current and past ruling coalitions, we do not delve into the details of state-level governance under PAS or in Sabah and Sarawak.

5. Chappell Lawson and Kenneth F. Greene (2014) 'Making clientelism work: how norms of reciprocity increase voter compliance', *Comparative Politics*, 47(1), pp. 61–85.

6. Herbert Kitschelt (2000) ‘Linkages between citizens and politicians in democratic polities’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 33(6/7), pp. 845–846.

7. Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson (2007) ‘Citizen–politician linkages: an introduction’, in H. Kitschelt and S.I. Wilkinson (Eds), *Patrons, Clients, and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 23.

8. Allen Hicken (2011) ‘Clientelism’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 14(1), pp. 290–294. For clientelism as ‘problem solving’ through non-political networks, see Mariela Szwarcberg (2012) ‘Revisiting clientelism: a network analysis of problem-solving networks in Argentina’, *Social Networks*, 34, pp 230–240.

9. James C. Scott (1972) ‘Patron–client politics and political change in Southeast Asia’, *American Political Science Review*, 66(1), p. 92; Carl H. Landé (1977) ‘Introduction: the dyadic basis of clientelism’, in Steffen W. Schmidt, James C. Scott, Carl Lande, Laura Guasti (Eds.), *Friends, Followers and Factions: A Reader*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. xiii–xv, xx.

10. Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007, pp. 1–3).

11. Hicken (2011, p. 294).

12. Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007, pp. 8–10, 12–13).

13. Sergiu Gherghina and Voluntiru Clara (2017) ‘A new model of clientelism: political parties, public resources, and private contributors’, *European Political Science Review*, 9(1), pp. 115–137.

14. Patronage is at least as contested a term as clientelism. Some scholars use it to refer specifically to public-sector jobs, granted in exchange for political support; some to refer to any benefits that a politician directs from state coffers to their clients; some as a subset among types of clientelist exchange; and some simply as interchangeable with clientelism. Hicken (2011, p. 295).

15. Ellen Lust (2009) ‘Competitive clientelism in the Middle East’, *Journal of Democracy*, 20(3), pp. 122–135.

16. Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007, pp. 11–12); Susan C. Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno and Valeria Brusco (2013) *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 7–8.

17. Staffan I. Lindberg (2010) ‘What accountability pressures do MPs in Africa face and how do they respond? Evidence From Ghana’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 48(1), pp. 118, 123, 125–27, 132.

18. Daniel J. Young (2009) ‘Is clientelism at work in African elections? A study of voting behavior in Kenya and Zambia’, *Afrobarometer Working Paper*, 106, pp. 1–4, 8.

19. Valerie Heitshusen, Garry Young and David M. Wood (2005) ‘Electoral context and MP constituency focus in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(1), pp. 32–45; Richard F. Fenno (1977) ‘US House members in their constituencies: an exploration’, *American Political Science Review*, 71(3), pp. 883–917; Pippa Norris (1997) ‘The puzzle of constituency service’, *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 3(2), pp. 29–49.

20. Hicken (2011, pp. 302–303); Kitschelt (2000, pp. 872–873).

21. Saya tak lupa tuan-tuan puan-puan; jangan lupa saya, Wangsa Maju, Kuala Lumpur, 1 May 2018, https://www.kinitv.com/video/60254O8, accessed 18 November 2018.

22. PAS has controlled at least the Kelantan state government for long stretches – but the state is among Malaysia's least developed, with comparatively meagre coffers.

23. Lawson and Greene (2014).

24. Mexico offers a parallel: the Partido de la Revolución Democrática preferred not to replicate the Partido Revolucionario Institucional's methods, but the need to focus more on winning elections than party institutionalization encouraged factional, personalized politics. Tina Hilgers (2008) 'Causes and consequences of political clientelism: Mexico's PRD in comparative perspective', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50(4), p. 124.

25. Lawson and Greene (2014, p. 70).

26. Local elections were provisionally suspended in 1964, then abolished permanently in 1976.

27. Asian Barometer Survey Wave 4, questions 157 and 99, http://www.asianbarometer.org/data/data-release, accessed 17 June 2018.

28. Merdeka Centre (2017) 'National public opinion survey on economic hardship indicators', 4–14 November, slide 5, http://merdeka.org/v4/index.php/downloads/category/2-researches?download = 181:nov-2017-economic-hardship-indicators, accessed 17 June 2018.

29. *Malay Mail* (2015) 'More than RM5m annual allocation for BN MPs starting next year, Najib says', 16 August, https://www.malaymail.com/s/952855/more-than-rm5m-annual-allocation-for-bn-mps-starting-next-year-najib-says, accessed 16 November 2018.

30. For instance, Gho Chee Yuan (2014) 'We will give out the RM200,000 allocation despite BN's rejection, says Azmin', *The Edge Markets*, 26 November, http://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/we-will-give-out-rm200000-allocation-despite-bns-rejection-says-azmin, accessed 16 November 2018.

31. Francis Kok Wah Loh (2003) 'Towards a new politics of fragmentation and contestation', in F. Loh and J. Saravanamuttu (Eds), *New Politics in Malaysia*. Singapore: ISEAS, pp. 262–263; Donald M. Nonini (2015) *Getting By: Class and State Formation among Chinese in Malaysia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 224–225.

32. Interviews suggest *penyelaras* entertain fewer but similar requests, to maintain party visibility.

33. Hicken (2011, p. 295).

34. Tricia Yeoh (2012) *States of Reform: Governing Selangor and Penang*. Penang: Penang Institute, p. 25.

35. Murray Hunter (2013) 'Village security and development committees (JKKK): frontline in Malaysia's next general election', *Eurasia Review*. https://www.eurasiareview.com/19082013-village-security-and-development-committees-jkkk-frontline-in-malaysias-next-general-election-analysis/, accessed 16 November 2018.

36. *Channel News Asia* (2017) 'Malaysia unveils expansionary budget as polls loom; sees solid 2018 growth', 27 October, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-unveils-expansionary-budget-as-polls-loom-najib-razak-9350222; also Trinna Leong (2017) 'Tough to loosen BN's hold on Malays', *Straits Times*, 7 February, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/tough-to-loosen-bns-hold-on-malays, accessed 16 November 2018.

37. For Selangor, see http://ipr.selangor.gov.my; for Penang, see *The Rocket* (2012) ‘A different sort of “AES”’, 15 December, https://www.therocket.com.my/en/a-different-sort-of-aes/ or *Roketkini* (2016) ‘Program AES Pulau Pinang semakin berjaya basmi kemiskinan, semua ADUN diminta bantu daftar penerima’, 27 April, https://www.roketkini.com/2016/04/27/program-aes-pulau-pinang-semakin-berjaya-basmi-kemiskinan-semua-adun-diminta-bantu-daftar-penerima/, all accessed 24 June 2018.

38. Mahathir Mohamad (2016) ‘Why I insist BR1M is bribery’, *Malaysiakini*, 30 December, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/367699, accessed 16 November 2018.

39. A consistently greater share of respondents (invariably near or over 50%) to a series of quarterly Merdeka Centre surveys from 2012 to 2014 deemed BR1M more an attempt to win votes than genuine assistance from the government; a substantial, but shifting proportion (as high as one-third) thought BR1M might sway their or others’ votes.

40. Available at http://www.wongchen.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/PH-Alternative-Budget-2018-ENGMPB.pdf, accessed 24 June 2018. They renamed BR1M Bantuan Sara Hidup (cost of living assistance).

41. Such strategies are not unique to Malaysia – and experience elsewhere suggests the legacy of, for instance, UMNO’s branding the DAP as ‘Chinese’ could prove enduringly corrosive, even if Pakatan could slough off or circumvent that framing this time. See, for instance, Karen E. Ferree (2010) *Framing the Race in South Africa: The Political Origins of Racial Census Elections*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

42. For example, Frederic C. Schaffer (2007) *Elections for Sale*: *The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

43. *Malaysiakini* (2018) ‘Gov’t MPs to get RM500k allocation, opposition MPs RM100k’, 6 June, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/428533, accessed 16 November 2018.

44. Albert Van Zyl (2010) ‘What is wrong with the constituency development funds?’, *IBP Budget Brief*, 3(10). Constituency-development funds’ discretionary character and inefficiency are problems not specific to Malaysia. https://ideas.repec.org/p/ess/wpaper/id2644.html, accessed 18 November 2018

45. *The Sun* (2018) ‘MCA service centres nationwide to shut down’, 13 June, http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2018/06/13/mca-service-centres-nationwide-shut-down, accessed 16 November 2018.

46. Lindberg (2010, p. 129); Keith R. Weghorst and Staffan I. Lindberg (2011) ‘Effective opposition strategies: collective goods or clientelism?’, *Democratization*, 18(5), pp. 1193–1214.

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