# The Fourteenth General Election of Malaysia:
# A Social Movement Analysis of
# Chinese Voting Decisions

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## Abstract

Of all Malaysia's general elections, the Fourteenth General Election (GE) held on 9 May 2018 was of momentous consequence. For the first time in Malaysia's history, the incumbent ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) lost its grip over Malaysia and was replaced by Pakatan Harapan (PH). As the second largest group of voters, the Chinese played an instrumental role in causing BN's defeat. There seemed to be a collective decision among Chinese voters to depose BN by denying its claim to victory in all Chinese majority seats. A massive 95 per cent of Chinese voters swung *en masse* in support of PH. This study will examine the collective decision of the Chinese electorate in the voting via social movement theories. Micro-level rational choice theory and macro-structural social strain theory are employed to dissect the Chinese voting behaviour. It becomes clear that a potent cocktail of macro- and micro-factors has been in play to help turn the tide against BN.

**Key words:** Chinese Malaysian, Malaysia's General Election, social strain theory, rational choice theory, collective action

## Introduction

Malaysia witnessed a historic event at the Fourteenth General Election (GE14) on 9 May 2018. For the first time in 60 years since independence, a change in government took place. Pakatan Harapan, a coalition that was minted just before the general election was held, managed to topple Barisan Nasional. PH is a coalition of four parties comprising Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu),

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and National Trust Party (Amanah). BN was the successor to the Alliance Party which was formed in 1957 by three ethnic-based parties comprising United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). It had morphed into a partnership of 13 parties since 1973 and known as BN but with UMNO towering over all constituent partners. BN had won all general elections prior to 2018 and had dominated Malaysian politics with UMNO occupying the driver's seat. Changes wrought in the political landscape by GE14 gave birth to the hitherto undreamed off possibility of the opposition coming into power. PH garnered 113 of the 222 parliamentary seats to overwhelm the 79 seats secured by BN, while another coalition, Gagasan Sejahtera (GS) led by Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), won 18. The remaining 12 seats were accounted for by Warisan and STAR (both parties from Sabah) and independent candidates. When the GE14 results were announced in the official gazette, PH had boosted its tally to 122 when several BN and independent members defected and crossed the political aisle. Being secure with a majority of seats, PH won the mandate to form the new federal government.

The cause of the stunning political victory recorded by PH was popularly attributed to the outcome of a political and social movement to reform Malaysian politics. It was perceived to be a movement by the electorate of all ethnicities to unseat BN. Some PH leaders claimed it was a Malaysian tsunami which had been at work (Faliq, 2018; Ong, 2018a). While it is undeniable that the GE14 results can never be possible without the support from Malaysians of different ethnicities, it will be interesting to find out the intensity of their collectivism. Various scholars such as Ratnam (1965), Wang (1970), Vasil (1980), Wan Hashim (1983), Heng (1988), Shamsul (1996) and Segawa (2013) had pointed out the fact that ethnicity had played a divisive role in Malaysian politics. Was the outcome of GE14 a reflection of Malaysians in overcoming the ethnic barrier and hence they voted collectively to depose an incumbent ruling coalition or was it rather the effect of the collective decision of specific ethnic groups and, if so, how intense was the process?

The Merdeka Centre, an independent research setup, confirmed that voters' ethnicity played a significant role in support of PH (Hazlin, 2018). The support of the Chinese electorate was as high as 95 per cent of the Chinese votes. This was followed by the Indian electorate who cast 70 to 75 per cent of their votes in support of PH. In contrast to the clear mandate from these two ethnic groups, the loyalty of Malay voters was torn among three Malay-dominated coalitions and parties. Their votes were badly split in the ratio of 35-40: 30-33: 25 to BN, PAS, and PH respectively. Based on these statistics, it was evident that the political tsunami that did occur was not one that involved the entire electorate but largely the Chinese and Indians whose target was to bring about a change of government hitherto led by BN. Like-minded Malay voters who had wanted to depose the BN government were behaving rather differently from the Chinese and Indian voters. Their votes were divided in their support primarily for PAS and secondarily

for PH. What is clear is the political tsunami that occurred was not an intensely collective Malaysian effort and it would not be entirely correct to allege that ethnicity was playing a divisive role in GE14.

In view of the overwhelming swing of Chinese votes in favour of PH, an investigation on the Chinese voting decision may yield insights on the behaviour of voters that may be relevant for future reference. The rationale behind the collective decision of Chinese voters against BN and for PH would be pertinent to understanding two issues: one is the comparison between the single-mindedness of Chinese voters and the divided loyalty among the Malays; the other is whether the Chinese electorate was genuinely attracted by the promised policies of PH or if they were merely looking for an alternative to BN to express their disillusion and despair. In short, was the collective behaviour of the Chinese voters that contributed to the political tsunami a well-founded movement to save Malaysia from further decay? This study seeks to understand the voting patterns of GE14 primarily by examining the factors behind the Chinese collective action. The study will apply the social strain theory with its structural perspective introduced by Neil J. Smelser (1962) and the rational choice theory which had been incorporated into the study of social movements arising from resource mobilization and political processes. Both structural and rational choice theories were designed to explain opposing views on the rise of social movements. Rather than viewing these theories as contra-dictory, this study adopts an integrated approach and treats these theories as complementary in search of answers to different questions concerning the emergence of the social movement and collective action initiated by Chinese voters in GE14.

## Chinese Voting Pattern during GE14

The Merdeka Centre's analysis of the GE14 electoral results reveals that Chinese voters acted collectively in support of PH. The discussion that follows will explore the extent to which this phenomenon had indeed occurred. A direct measure is to examine the results of Chinese majority parliamentary seats. These seats are taken to be those in which 50 per cent or more of the voters are Chinese. Hypothetically, PH was envisaged to win and with a large majority of votes. Another measure is to dissect the performance of Chinese-based parties. The assumption was that the collective Chinese electoral support for PH would frustrate BN's hopes of winning Chinese majority seats.

### Pakatan Harapan Performance in Chinese Majority Seats
As shown in Table 1, there were 33 Chinese majority parliamentary seats in GE14.

Table 1. Pakatan Harapan Performance during GE14 in Chinese Majority Seats

| State | Percentage of Chinese Voters | Total Voters | PH Votes | BN Votes | GS Votes | Others* Votes | Total Valid Votes | Percentage of Votes Won by PH |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kepong (P114) | 89 | 72,696 | 56,516 | 4,888 | DNC | DNC | 61,404 | 92.04 |
| Bandar Kuching (P195) | 89 | 81,856 | 48,548 | 12,575 | DNC | DNC | 61,123 | 79.43 |
| Tanjung (P49) | 84 | 49,586 | 34,663 | 5,064 | DNC | DNC | 39,727 | 87.25 |
| Cheras (P123) | 83 | 78,819 | 56,671 | 7,006 | DNC | DNC | 63,677 | 89.00 |
| Seputeh (P122) | 82 | 86,256 | 63,094 | 7,035 | DNC | DNC | 70,129 | 89.97 |
| Batu Gajah (P66) | 75 | 81,399 | 52,850 | 8,982 | DNC | 955 | 62,787 | 84.41 |
| Bukit Bintang (P120) | 75 | 69,526 | 44,516 | 7,256 | DNC | 636 | 52,408 | 84.94 |
| Bukit Gelugor (P51) | 74 | 91,595 | 65,622 | 9,671 | DNC | 412 | 75,705 | 86.68 |
| Bukit Bendera (P48) | 73 | 75,069 | 50,049 | 9,318 | DNC | 339 | 59,706 | 83.83 |
| Ipoh Timur (P64) | 72 | 91,486 | 56,519 | 13,722 | DNC | DNC | 70,241 | 80.46 |
| Bagan (P43) | 71 | 71,583 | 51,653 | 7,751 | DNC | 683 | 60,087 | 85.96 |
| Bukit Mertajam (P45) | 70 | 88,988 | 63,784 | 10,907 | DNC | DNC | 74,691 | 85.4 |
| Damansara (P106) | 69 | 164,322 | 121,283 | 14,380 | DNC | 617 | 136,280 | 89.00 |
| Lanang (P211) | 69 | 61,973 | 29,905 | 15,359 | DNC | 628 | 45,892 | 65.16 |
| Jelutong (P5) | 65 | 76,991 | 50,700 | 12,529 | DNC | 437 | 63,666 | 79.63 |
| Klang (P110) | 65 | 149,348 | 98,279 | 19,506 | 9,169 | 120 | 127,074 | 77.34 |
| Kota Kinabalu (P172) | 64 | 56,220 | 31,632 | 7,546 | DNC | 3,132 | 42,310 | 74.76 |
| Stampin (P196) | 64 | 66,240 | 33,060 | 18,839 | DNC | DNC | 51,899 | 63.70 |
| Ipoh Barat (P65) | 63 | 84,874 | 55,613 | 9,889 | DNC | DNC | 65,502 | 84.90 |
| Sarikei (P208) | 63 | 39,561 | 16,327 | 13,757 | DNC | 392 | 30,476 | 53.57 |
| Sibu (P212) | 63 | 74,149 | 33,811 | 22,389 | DNC | 553 | 56,753 | 55.57 |
| Beruas (P68) | 59 | 79,794 | 41,231 | 13,277 | 5,759 | DNC | 60,267 | 68.41 |
| Segambut (P117) | 59 | 77,956 | 53,124 | 7,422 | 4,181 | DNC | 64,727 | 82.07 |
| Subang (P104) | 57 | 146,422 | 104,430 | 12,077 | 9,025 | 173 | 125,705 | 83.07 |

| State | Percentage of Chinese Voters | Total Voters | PH Votes | BN Votes | GS Votes | Others* Votes | Total Valid Votes | Percentage of Votes Won by PH |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kota Melaka (P138) | 57 | 126,848 | 76,518 | 27,343 | DNC | 1,415 | 105,276 | 72.68 |
| Batu Kawan (P46) | 56 | 65,394 | 42,683 | 9,130 | 2,636 | 256 | 54,705 | 78.02 |
| Kampar (P70) | 55 | 69,436 | 30,216 | 18,415 | 3,864 | DNC | 52,495 | 57.56 |
| Miri (P219) | 55 | 80,386 | 35,739 | 22,076 | DNC | DNC | 57,815 | 61.82 |
| Kulai (P163) | 54 | 99,147 | 55,312 | 22,564 | 6,667 | DNC | 84,543 | 65.42 |
| Bakri (P145) | 53 | 73,883 | 38,718 | 15,507 | 7,575 | DNC | 61,800 | 62.65 |
| Puchong (P103) | 52 | 96,437 | 60,429 | 12,794 | 10,255 | DNC | 83,478 | 72.39 |
| Sandakan (P186) | 51 | 39,777 | 19,094 | 8,996 | DNC | DNC | 28,090 | 67.97 |
| Iskandar Puteri (P162) | 50 | 138,299 | 80,726 | 35,862 | DNC | DNC | 116,588 | 69.24 |
| Total | | 2,806,316 | 1,753,315 | 443,892 | 59,131 | 10,748 | 2,667,026 | - |

Source: Adapted from information provided by https://undi.info

Notes:

1. Chinese Majority Seats - Seats with more than 50% Chinese voters.
2. Total Valid Votes - Votes that were counted, excluding spoilt votes.
3. Percentage of Votes Won by PH - PH Votes/Total Valid Votes x 100.
4. Other Votes - Votes won by independent or smaller Parties such as Parti Rakyat Malaysia, Parti Sosialis Malaysia, etc.
5. GS - Gagasan Sejahtera.
6. DNC - Did not contest.

PH recorded a landslide victory by capturing all 33 seats contested and 87.6 per cent of combined votes. The Kepong parliamentary seat in which 89 per cent of the electorate was Chinese, PH garnered 92 per cent of total valid votes. In other seats where Chinese voters constituted more than 80 per cent of the electorate, PH accounted for 80 per cent or more of the votes, the only exception was Bandar Kuching in Sarawak which was held by the late Tan Sri Adenan Satem in the state election of 2016. BN had managed to capture five out of twelve urban seats in which Chinese votes were numerically substantial (Breakdown of Sarawak election wins, 2016). Tan Sri Adenan was subsequently appointed as the Chief Minister and leader of the Sarawak BN until his death in 2017. He was instrumental in introducing various policies that resonated with the wishes of Sarawakians, including the Chinese community. The state government's decision to recognize the United Examination Certificate (UEC) awarded by the independent Chinese schools in Malaysia was particularly well-received by the Chinese (Tan, 2016; Lee, 2018). The Chinese have long been seeking the official recognition of UEC as an entry requirement to local public universities or the state civil service. It was likely that the remnant of his influence had dented the margin of the PH victory. Apart from Bandar Kuching, other Chinese majority seats in Sarawak where voting had swung towards PH were Lanang, Sarikei, Sibu, and Miri.

In all other states, the votes captured by PH in Chinese majority seats were larger than the number of Chinese voters. It was this collective support by Chinese as well as that of non-Chinese voters that had made possible the clean sweep of the seats and with large margins of victory.

**Performance of Chinese-based Parties**

Had the Chinese not voted collectively in support of PH, Chinese-based parties such as MCA, the Malaysian People Movement Party (Gerakan), and Sarawak's United People's Party (SUPP) would have been able to win some seats. Chinese-based parties are those in which all or the majority of their members are of Chinese descent. DAP was hitherto the major Chinese-based opposition party of past elections and was regarded as such during GE14. Like Gerakan and SUPP, DAP members belong to all ethnicities and are technically not ethnic-based parties. But in all cases, the size of non-Chinese membership is small compared with that of the Chinese. They champion the rights of all ethnic communities and hold some appeal to non-Chinese communities. In contrast, MCA was formed to safeguard and promote the interests of the Chinese community. BN component parties such as MCA, Gerakan, and SUPP, as parties to the larger coalition and with the advantage of incumbency, had hitherto benefited from the electoral support of non-Chinese voters.

Figure 1 shows that the performance of Chinese-based parties in the BN coalition had been on the decline since GE12 of 2008. It was only five years earlier during GE11 that the MCA alone had won 31 parliamentary seats. The decline accelerated in the following general election

of 2013 and reached its nadir in 2018 when it lost all but one seat it was assigned to contest. Its loss, and that of Gerakan, was the gain of the DAP which secured 42 seats in GE14, compared with 12 seats in GE11. Meanwhile, Gerakan, which had won 10 seats in GE11, was totally wiped out in GE14.
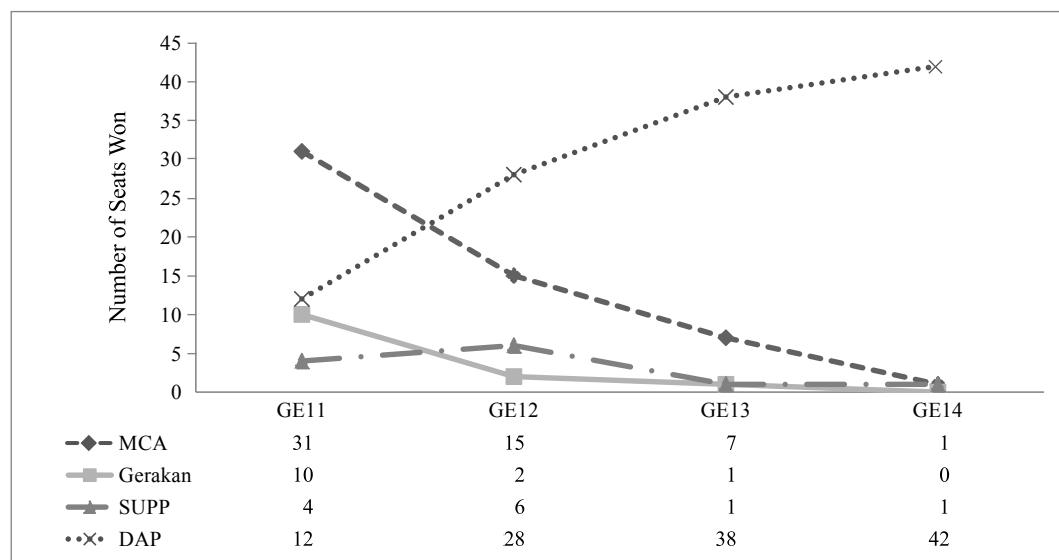


| | GE11 | GE12 | GE13 | GE14 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MCA | 31 | 15 | 7 | 1 |
| Gerakan | 10 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| SUPP | 4 | 6 | 1 | 1 |
| DAP | 12 | 28 | 38 | 42 |

Figure 1. Performance of Chinese-based Parties in GE11 to GE14
Source: Adapted from information retrieved from https://undi.info

The results of GE14 was historic in the near complete victory of DAP in the electoral contest on the one hand, and the total failure of MCA and Gerakan on the other. There was a growing trend in the voting pattern of Chinese electorate, in a clear show of collective action, to veer away from BN to give their mandate to PH. Armed with a block of votes comprising 28 per cent of the national total, and second in size to that of Malay votes, the Chinese electorate, by acting collectively, was a potent force that could contribute the rise or downfall of Chinese-based parties contesting in Chinese majority constituencies (Figure 2). According to Merdeka Centre, 95 per cent of the Chinese votes were cast in favour of PH, which was equivalent to a loss of 26 per cent to BN. Had the Indian votes been similarly cast in support of PH, the loss to BN would be in excess of 30 per cent of its votes. This being the case, BN had to rely heavily on Malay votes to retain power. This failed to take place as Malay votes were split among BN, PAS, and PH. That BN had secured the largest number of Malay votes was not sufficient to allow it to control enough seats to form the central government. The consequence was an unprecedented transfer of power to a coalition of opposition parties.
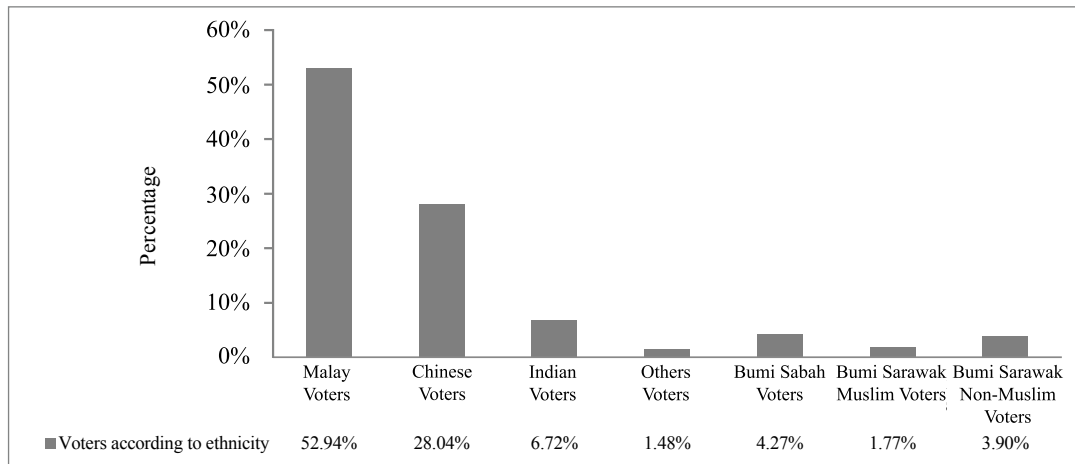
Figure 2. Distribution by Percentage of Voters according to Ethnicity for GE14
Source: Compiled from statistics extracted from https://undi.info

## Social Movement and Collective Action

Empirical evidence suggests the occurrence of a Chinese collective action to vote against BN, and at the same time half hoping that PH would perform well enough to form the next government. This collective action was almost unanimous. The result was a sweep of 33 Chinese majority seats by PH and the near elimination of BN. This was an unprecedented experience to affected parties on either side of the political divide and an unequivocal demonstration of power by the electorate to grant or withdraw its mandate to contesting parties. The decisive swing in the Chinese voting pattern was a reflection of the presence of a social movement with the aim to blunt the dominance of BN, if not to depose it altogether. If there was indeed such a movement, why and how did it develop and what was driving Chinese voters to act *en masse*?

The study of social movements and collective action is not new and there are many ways to understand the root cause of these phenomena. Herbert Blumer (1995) defined social movements as collective enterprises established by those who are dissatisfied with the current form of life. The intention is to bring about changes in selected aspects of social life or the society itself that do not fit into the expectations of the people behind the social movements. Scholars from the Marxian school of thought perceive social movement differently and regard them as being created by endemic structural problems of the capitalist system. In order to solve various problems arising from the class structure, members of society would carry out a revolution to remove capitalism (Morris and Herring, 1987).

Neil J. Smelser (1962) developed a similar theory from a different perspective. Instead of understanding social movements as a product of conflict induced by the failure of a social structure to curtail inequality, Smelser's theory views social movements as the outcome of

intertwined factors which he labelled as "determinants." These determinants work in the form of an aggregated chain and the presence of one must be accompanied by other determinants. The key determinants are the presence of structural conduciveness and structural strain. Structural conduciveness refers to the presence of social conditions that permit social movements to grow. For instance, the presence of a social condition that causes members of an ethnic group to feel that they have been deprived of certain rights would form the structural conduciveness for the group members to ferment a movement to champion whatever they have been deprived of. Structural strain is viewed as impairment brought about by the dysfunction of certain components in the social structure (Smelser, 1962: 47). An ethnic group member may feel that he has been deprived of certain rights caused by a dysfunctional structure. However, the impairment alone would not induce a social movement. It must be felt by the public in general and the feelings must then be mobilized to become a collective action to tackle the targeted impairment. Smelser named these determinants as the growth and spread of a generalized belief, precipitating factor, and the mobilization of participants. The structural strain must be acknowledged and accepted by members of the public. The acceptance will then be mobilized to form a social movement that aims to create a collective action to achieve the social movement's goal. Even so, the social movement and the collective action will only be effective if there is no social control in the form of stern measures taken by the opponents of the movement.

Social movements may also be seen as actions by a particular group on matters and issues that affect their self-interest. This perspective is based on Mancur Olson's (1965) rational choice explanation of collective action. Based on Olson's study, John D. Macharty and Mayer N. Zald (1977: 1215) argue that social movements are the outcomes of people's choice concerning social strains that affect the self-interest of a group of people and prompting them to take action by mobilizing available resources to form a collective action. Not all social strains may evolve into social movements. The rational choice approach is also used by Charles Tilly (1979) to explain political social movement. Also known as the political process theory, Tilly views collective action as an outcome of an interest group championing what they want to achieve but acting within a political framework. Hence social movements may emerge only when members of a group have strong reasons to act and when the political atmosphere is conducive.

There are then two broad approaches to the study of social movements. Smelser emphasizes social structure defects as the catalyst of social movements while the rational choice approach stresses the role of self-interest and opportunities. This study will attempt to integrate these approaches to explain the collective action of Chinese voters during GE14. From the perspective of Smelser's structural approach, it may be argued that Chinese voters have long harboured a sense of insecurity and political marginalization arising from the structural transformation of the economy. The growing sense of insecurity provided a potent cause to ferment a movement to safeguard their rights. As to why this Chinese collective action did not

materialize in previous general elections may be explained by the rational choice approach that collective action would only galvanize into a social movement when specific conditions are in place. This approach gives due credit to the role of "self-interest" as the micro-factor that causes Chinese voters to act collectively. This particular concern, however, has not been given sufficient focus in Smelser's social strain theory.

## Chinese Voters' Collective Action during GE14: A Social Movement Analysis

The fact that Chinese and Malay electorates acted differently during GE14 underlines the dynamic role of ethnic-based voting patterns. Issues impinging on ethnic issues have often led to the Chinese perceptions of deprivation of their inherent rights. The sense of being marginalized constitutes a core concern in the Chinese consciousness (Chin *et al.*, 2015). Frederick Holst (2012) attributed such feelings to the ethnicization of Malaysians where citizens build up a belief or are made to believe that they are ethnically different. Ethnicity considerations then provide the structural conduciveness for each ethnic community to occupy its exclusive platform to propagate the process of interest-articulation to make explicit demands (Smelser, 1962: 278).

Each ethnic community has its set of core demands to safeguard and even to expand their self-interest. The Chinese community, working through Chinese-based parties in BN, the DAP, and Chinese guilds and associations, often voice their concerns over what are perceived as pro-Malay policies of the BN government (Chin, 2010). Failure to obtain official attention and effective action on their concerns has, over time, given rise to dissatisfaction and strain among a large swathe of Chinese society. The strongly entrenched politics of consociation and "sharing of power" of the BN coalition had led to Chinese disillusion on issues of social justice and equality, and eventually breeding a sense of being "second-class citizens" in their own country.

The quinquennial general elections provide the perfect platform for Chinese voters to make known their preferences or to express their support or vent their frustrations with the government of the day. Until GE14, the BN coalition was synonymous with "the" government. In actual fact, Chinese voters had been generally supportive of BN in the past general elections. In GE10 (1999) and GE11 (2004), BN was able to corner more than two-thirds of the parliamentary seats, a feat that was possible only with the strong backing of Chinese voters. BN Chinese-based parties such as MCA, Gerakan and SUPP had then performed remarkably well. MCA had won 28 out of 35 seats contested during GE10, Gerakan captured seven out of the ten seats, while SUPP made a clean sweep of all seven seats contested (Table 2). In sharp contrast, the DAP was deserted by the Chinese voters, succeeding in only ten out of 47 seats contested. MCA and other Chinese-based parties in BN continued to receive support from Chinese voters in GE11.

Table 2. Seats Won by Chinese-based Parties in the GE10, 1999

| Party | No. of Seats Contested | No. of Seats Won |
|-------|------------------------|------------------|
| MCA | 35 | 28 |
| Gerakan | 10 | 7 |
| SUPP | 7 | 7 |
| DAP | 47 | 10 |

Source: Adapted from Lin (2002)

A comparison of the results of GE10 and GE11 with those of GE14 shows a near complete swing in the Chinese support from BN to PH. This extraordinary event pointed to a distinct occurrence of a collective decision in favour of the newly-founded coalition of opposition parties working in tandem to offer itself as a viable alternative to the incumbent coalition. A structural strain perceived by the Chinese and its resulting sense of deprivation and marginalization had not created a collective action of sufficient potency to depose BN in the past. This weight of the structural strain had needed the enforcement of the Chinese community's rational choice and the urge to safeguard its self-interest that galvanized the collective action into an intense social movement to depose BN.

The desire to replace BN had emerged as an option since GE12 that was held in 2008. Chinese support for BN had visibly declined since then. MCA had managed to win only 15 parliamentary seats or half the number won in GE11. Chinese support continued to dwindle as MCA's seats fell to seven in GE13 in 2013 and one in GE14. The loss of support from Chinese voters was correlated with the deepening perception of BN's image as the government, riddled with corruption and bad governance. A tally of negative news concerning BN's failure to serve as an efficient and just government was voiced in cyber space. In 2008, several online news portals such as *Malaysiakini* had emerged to provide "alternative" channels of news and public opinion. The news and opinions were detrimental to the image of the BN government. Social media such as Facebook added fresh platforms for political discourse among Malaysians. The online news portals and social media have evolved to serve the cause of social movements which have gradually gathered momentum to become an "industry" to back up the organizations to pursue their interests.

In recent years, Malaysians have been bombarded with issues that smack of bad governance on the part of BN. These issues range from political interference in the appointment process of senior government officials to those concerning the rising cost of living, manipulation of electoral system, escalating crime rates and others. The cumulative effect of these open opinions and discussions was to create serious doubts among the citizenry on BN's capability to govern Malaysia to meet the basic standard of good governance (Ho, 2012). The backlash resulted in the formation of social movement groups such as Bersih whose mandate is to champion clean elections, *Malaysiakini* to generate political news and stimulate discussions, and other similar groups.

Another source of social strain that had emerged, especially among Chinese voters, was the perception that BN had failed to function as an efficient and clean government and had instead become a "rotten" one. After GE13 in 2013, the failure of BN to project itself as a good and efficient government was exacerbated by news of the murder of a Mongolian woman and romours associated with high officials. News of the death of Teoh Beng Hock, an assistant to a DAP leader, while in the custody of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), also caused uproar among the Chinese.

Disillusion with BN's government failures gathered momentum as through online news portal and social media after the GE13. A BN government investment body, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), came under intense public scrutiny for perceived financial mismanagement. News had leaked out that substantial sums amounting to RM2.6 billion were believed to have been siphoned off through 1MDB into a personal account. Opposition parties argued that there were serious abuses of power when money that was supposed to belong to the government was unaccounted for (Right and Clark, 2015).

With time, the impression of BN as incapable of governing Malaysia became increasingly entrenched in the minds of a large section of the people. To make matters worse, the government's reaction to criticisms precipitated widespread condemnations. Three senior officials were investigated with the charge of attempting to topple the suspected leader (Reporters, 2017). Apart from allegations of corrupt and kleptomaniac tendencies, BN was also seen to show a lack of concern for the wellbeing of the people. The implementation of Goods and Services Tax (GST) was highly unpopular among Malaysians and was blamed for the rise in the cost of living. The BN government's attempt to reduce subsidies for food items such as flour and sugar were highly unpopular. The imposition of GST and withdrawal of subsidies were linked to efforts to pay off debts incurred by 1MDB (Khairul, 2017). This series of events portrayed a government that was incapable of administrating the country. The general belief among many was that Malaysia needed to be saved. The different opposition parties comprising DAP, PKR and Amanah began to mobilize support for the "Save Malaysia" movement to oust the BN government.

The PH narrative gained credibility when Tun Dr. Mahathir Muhamad, a former Prime Minister who led BN for 22 years, quit UMNO and threw his support behind the "Save Malaysia" movement. The hesitant Chinese voters, who had viewed Tun Dr. Mahathir as Malay centric and whose policies were not always welcomed by them, endorsed the belief that his leadership of a coalition would provide a viable alternative government to that of BN.

The Chinese-based opposition party DAP, acting as a social movement organization, looked upon Mahathir as the lesser "evil" compared with Najib. Its senior leader, Lim Kit Siang, the erstwhile bitter political enemy of Mahathir, did not regard him as anti-Chinese (Lim, 2018). The DAP strategy was to persuade Chinese voters to accept Mahathir to take care of the incumbent prime minister. The general consensus among Chinese voters was that Mahathir's

participation would also appeal to Malay voters who wished to see BN being replaced. Indeed PH leaders were betting on a Malay backlash against BN. The convergence of support for PH from the Malays and Chinese would effectively circumvent the likelihood of ethnic conflict on election day. This development would be one of the best examples to reflect Charles Tilly's (1979) Political Process Theory. As the political atmosphere was looking increasingly conducive to the unseating of BN and, despite misgivings over a Mahathir-led administration and the uncertainty of Malay backing for PH, the Chinese nevertheless saw GE14 as an opportunity to bring about regime change.

BN's attempt to check the movement by using threat rather than a good social control plan as its strategy fared miserably (Pui, 2018). BN reminded the Chinese of the importance of Chinese representation in the cabinet. Its strategy on Malay voters was to reiterate the importance of Malay and Muslim unity to strengthen their control over Malaysia. In contrast, PH through DAP was able to mobilize the support of Chinese voters by projecting itself as the saviour of the country. Its strategy was to project itself as an alternative to BN.

According to the Resource Mobilization Theory, a social movement does not exist without interested parties investing their efforts and resources to develop it. The component parties in PH were indeed effective in mobilizing support through campaigns channelled through social media, *ceramah* (political talks) and different news portal and focusing on issues that would discredit BN. BN's strategy directed at the Chinese centred on highlighting past achievements in serving the needs of the community. MCA's announcement of BN's plan to build several Chinese primary schools was countered by DAP's reminder of its failure to serve Chinese education well and to obtain government recognition for the certificate of Chinese independent high schools (Santiago, 2018).

The collective action of Chinese voters in GE14 was a manifestation of the interplay of a various macro- and micro-factors. Structurally, these factors had given rise to the emergence of social strains which in turn became the basis for a social movement to depose BN. Initially, these strains were confined to issues concerning Chinese interests under the BN government. These took on more serious concerns as various governance issues affecting BN surfaced to reinforce the overall discontent with BN and the need for an alternative. The combination of factors had then presented themselves as a potent mobilization determinant mentioned that enabled DAP its PH coalition members to seize the opportunity to galvanize Chinese votes to dislodge BN from its perch.

The holding of GE14 in the midst of the snowballing discontent associated with the existence of structural conduciveness and structural strains that inflicted Malaysian politics presented an unprecedented window of opportunity for the PH to launch an overthrow of the BN government. The component parties in the PH coalition succeeded in orchestrating efforts to mobilize available resources to galvanize electoral support for the "Save Malaysia" movement. The support was forthcoming from across the spectrum of ethnic communities with

the Chinese electorate throwing almost all its weight behind PH. The support of prominent Malay politicians for Mahathir boosted Chinese confidence that even the Malay constituency was not entirely opposed to the toppling of BN. Chinese voters had been categorized into two camps in the 1990s (Ng, 2003: 93), i.e. those who advocated a conciliatory approach and others who opted for a confrontational approach. This division began to diminish after GE12 and, in GE14, almost all Chinese voters were confrontational and would like to witness the defeat of BN. These changes had exacerbated a gathering discontent that only needed to be mobilized to become reality. This mobilization process was made possible by the concerted efforts of the parties concerned with each playing its specific role on separate sections of the electorate.

## Conclusion

This study on GE14 indicates that the presence of both structural and rational choice factors had created a potent force for Chinese voters to ferment a social movement with the intention to dislodge the incumbent BN coalition. Both theories relating to resource mobilization and rational choice may be used interchangeably or to complement each other in explaining different stages in the process of formation of social movements. It is suggested that the integration of social movement theories should take into account different theoretical perspectives to explain the complexity in the formation of social movements and collective action. An integrated approach will hold much more promise for theoretical progress (McAdam *et al.*, 1996: 10).

Prior to GE14, structural issues of personal or ethnic nature were giving rise to Chinese loss of faith in BN as a coalition that would bring about satisfactory administration and progress to the country. At the micro level, they feared further encroachments upon their self-interest if BN were to continue to govern the country. The formation of PH provided an appropriate channel through which the mobilization of Chinese support became a viable option. PH thus became not just a choice but an opportunity to displace BN as the only option to helm the reins of government. The result was an effective show of collective power through the election process in GE14.

The collective action of Chinese voters has also signalled that for a similar move to take effect in future elections requires the presence of structural and micro factors in terms of issues, interests, choices and opportunities to be in place. Now that PH has formed the government, it would need to give due consideration to these factors to ensure continued support not only from the Chinese but also the entire Malaysian electorate.

## Notes

1 One of the issues that attracted the attention of Malaysian social media relates to an alleged telephone call from a prominent lawyer to a person who aspired to be the Chief Justice of Malaysia. The conversation implied that the lawyer was in a position to influence the appointment of Malaysia's chief judge based on his political connection to BN (*The Star* Online, 22 January 2008).

2 Eventually, Zeti Akhtar Aziz, Governor of the Central Bank, Abdul Ghani Pattail, Attonery General, and Abu Kassim Muhamed, Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission's Commissioner, resigned from their positions and went into retirement.

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