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TECHNICALLY, the 1969 general election was the first national elections for Malaysia. Prior to that, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Malaya had had their respective elections separately from 1963 to 1964.

Electorally, this explained part of the uncertainty over the outcome of the 1969 elections - 40 out of 144 representatives would be elected from East Malaysia. But, the actual uncertainty was smaller because Tun Mustapha Datu Harun's United Sabah National Organisation (Usno) won 10 out of 16 seats unopposed for the Alliance on nomination day.

If winning a two-third parliamentary majority or 96 seats was the minimum goal for the Alliance, then it needed only to win another 86 seats, from the peninsula (104 seats), Sarawak (24) and Sabah (6).

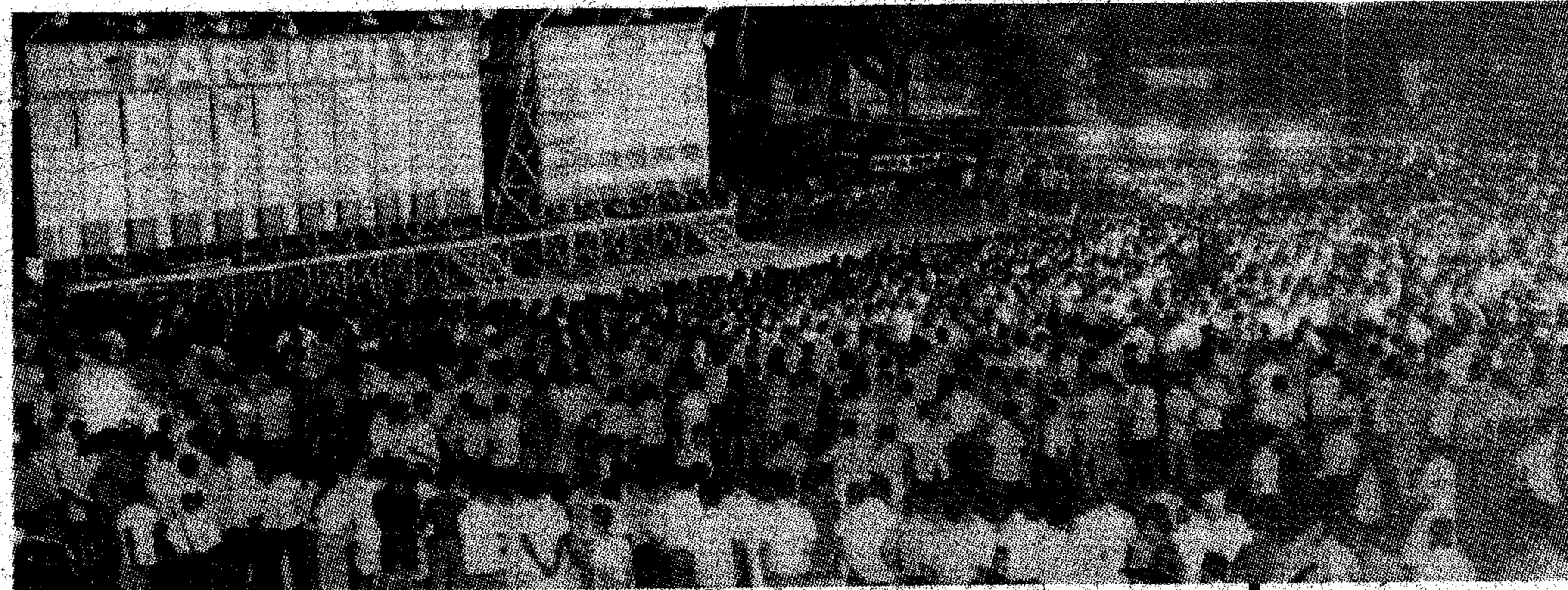
By 1969, the peninsula's political landscape had changed significantly from 1964.

Firstly, a few opposition parties had faded out from the electoral arena. The People's Action Party (PAP), for one, had retreated to Singapore after the island state was expelled from Malaysia in 1965, but the Democratic Action Party (DAP) continued its struggle here.

The once powerful Labour Party chose to boycott the elections to protest the mass arrests of its leaders. Meanwhile, former MCA president Lim Chong Eu had abandoned his United Democratic Party to form in 1968 a new centre-left party, Gerakan, with former Labour leaders like Tan Chee Khoon and university professors like Syed Hussin Al-Atas and Wang Gungwu.

Secondly, old coalitions disintegrated and a new one was made. The Socialist Front (SF), which contested the 1959 and 1964 elections had collapsed due to the disputes over language and other issues between the Labour Party and Partai Rakyat (PR), leaving the latter to contest six seats on its own. The Malaysian Solidarity Convention (MSC), sponsored by the PAP, had died a natural death with the separation of Singapore from Malaysia.

Three parties competing for largely non-Malay support - the DAP, Gerakan and the People's Progressive Party - had, however, reached an electoral pact to ensure a multi-cornered contest. In 1964, failure to put up a single candidate had cost the Opposition seven seats or 6.7% of the peninsula's 104 seats. The Alliance won these seats instead despite more than half of the voters rejecting it.



Watershed elections of 1969

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The 1969 elections was dominated by communal sentiments over the questions of language, education and equality. The Alliance lost supporters to PAS and the three non-Malay opposition parties coming from two ends of the political spectrum.

Such competition is in fact not uncommon for the "centrist party" in multi-ethnic societies. In 1971, Zambia's multi-ethnic ruling party Unip which led the country to independence found itself attacked by two opposition parties which represented competing ethnic interests. Unip's defeat in five of eleven by-elections alarmed President Kaunda who in the end chose to ban opposition parties altogether and turned Zambia into a *de jure* one-party state.

Very interestingly, the attrition of Malay support was much higher than that of the non-Malays. Malay opposition parties' vote shares in the peninsula increased drastically from about 15% in 1964 to 25% in 1969 while the support for non-Malay opposition parties remained roughly the same at 26% in both elections. Thanks to the electoral system, however, PAS seats increased from nine to 12 seats only while the non-Malay opposition parties from eight to 25.

The opposition parties' gain at state level was more shocking to the Alliance Party which not only continued to lose to PAS in Kelantan, but also to political infant Gerakan in Penang. No party commanded an absolute majority in two other states.

The Alliance held only 14 out of 24 seats in Selangor and 19 out of 40 in Perak. Some quarters became anxious that non-Malays would become *mentris besar*.

Two days after the announcement of the result, ethnic riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur on May 13 and soon spread to other areas. The official explanation blamed the riots on the opposition's victory parades but declassified British intelligence have since pointed to other causes.

The riots prompted the declaration of Emergency Rule and the suspension of Parliament. Uncompleted elections in Sabah, Sarawak and a Malacca constituency were suspended. A selected circle of politicians, bureaucrats and security officers formed the National Operations Council (NOC) and ruled the country by decree until 1971.

Harshly attacked by young Malay nationalists in Umno including Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Tunku stepped down in 1970 on ceremonial grounds, saying he did not want to serve as premier for the next Yang di-Pertuan Agong who was his nephew. In reality, many observers noted that the power had long passed into the hands of his deputy and successor Tun Abdul Razak.

The 1969 ethnic riots, officially attributed to inter-ethnic socio-economic disparity and political division, warranted sea changes in Malaysian society, in economy and politics. On the first front, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was intro-

duced to achieve its twin goals of poverty eradication and restructuring of society. The attrition of Malay support for Umno had clearly sent a powerful message.

To curb so-called "politicking", once parliamentary rule was restored, the Constitution was immediately amended to place four sensitive issues, namely the special status of bumiputras (Article 153), national language (Article 152), the position of Malay Rulers (Article 181) and citizenship (Part II), beyond public discussion. Local elections, suspended since 1965, were permanently abolished in 1973.

Tun Razak's *coup de grace* in consolidating Umno's dominance was the formation of coalition governments at state and local levels in 1970 and 1971, followed by the expansion of the Alliance into Barisan Nasional (BN) by 1974.

The co-optation started with Sarawak after the resumption of elections in East Malaysia in mid-1970. Like Perak and Selangor, Sarawak had a hung assembly (totaling 48 seats), with two possible coalitions: a 23-seat coalition of Muslim- and Chinese-based parties or a 32-seat Dayak-Chinese coalition.

The federal government broke the deal for the former which resulted in a 35-seat coalition of a Muslim-dominated Sarawak Alliance (15 seats), Chinese-majority Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) (12 seats) and the Dayak-based Parti Pesaka (8 seats). SNAP, whose former leader was the first Chief Minister Stephen

The results of the May 10, 1969 elections are flashed on a king-size scoreboard erected in Padang Selangor Club, now Dataran Merdeka, before a 30,000-strong crowd. The Alliance was trumped by the Opposition.

Kalong Ningkan, was left in the cold with twelve seats. In return also for its support in Parliament, SUPP was rewarded with a federal ministership.

The Sarawak formula was soon tried out in the peninsula. Despite holding a two-third majority, Penang's ruling party Gerakan decided to share its state power with the Alliance in February 1972 in return for federal support and aid. This caused a break-up of the Gerakan party, producing the short-lived Pekemas party led by Dr Tan Chee Khoon.

The Alliance's third coalition government was formed in Perak, at state and municipal levels, with the People's Progressive Party (PPP) which ruled Ipoh. Nominally, PPP remained an opposition party at the federal level.

PPP's gain, by being co-opted, was perhaps the least of all the co-opted parties' but it feared not having any other alternatives. As state governments started taking over municipal councils, it feared the loss of its power base in Ipoh.

Finally, on New Year's Day of 1973, the Alliance and PAS sealed the last coalition agreement. PAS gained a number of federal and state positions while Umno benefited from two state executive council seats in Kelantan. On July 1, 1974, the Alliance and its new coalition partners officially re-engineered their coalition into the Barisan Nasional (BN). This brilliant project killed three birds with one stone.

» it effectively eliminated nearly all political competition as the opposition seat share in Parliament shrunk from 37.5% to 15.3% with only the DAP and SNAP remaining as Opposition.

» the proliferation of parties within the BN left Umno in a stronger position vis-a-vis its partners than in the Alliance era.

» the proliferation has also provided differentiation, leading some voters to believe in the diversity of choices and alternatives within BN.

Compared to some leaders in the developing world who banned opposition parties, Tun Razak was a political genius. He understood the importance of government legitimacy. In his own words, "the view we take is that democratic government is the best and most acceptable form of government. So long as the form is preserved, the substance can be changed to suit conditions of a particular country".

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