



# FINAL RECKONING

An Insider's View of The Fall of Malaysia's  
Barisan Nasional Government

A spectacular story of political betrayal, told not only with verve, authority and the laser eye of a journalist but with the knowing speed of the smart screenwriter.

—**TOM PLATE**, author of *Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad: Doctor M-Operation Malaysia*

ROMEN BOSE





# Final Reckoning: An Insider's View of The Fall of Malaysia's Barisan Nasional Government

Romen Bose

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## Introduction

They say that truth is often stranger than fiction.

Some will claim that this book is fiction.

It is not.

Because it is the truth.

For those of us who witnessed first-hand the implosion of a sixty-one-year-old political system that had been the foundation of an independent Malaysia, the story told here is a bitter reality, that some have yet to fully come to terms with, even three years after the collapse.

The six years that I consulted for Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak and the senior leadership of Malaysia's Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition Government, was a high-octane political rollercoaster ride which came to a juddering halt on the night of 9 May 2018.

Although I had only a small role in all that transpired, this book serves as a record of the political collective responsibility that all of us who served and worked on the losing side must accept for the fall of the BN Government.

I do have regrets.

I regret the fact that I accepted assurances on numerous occasions that critical issues affecting the country would be sorted even though I suspected that some of Najib's staff and officers would not bother to follow his instructions. For not being more forceful with my points

of view in convincing the country's senior leadership to do what I felt was right. For not pushing harder to do away with the silos in the Prime Minister's Office and for not insisting that Najib be ruthless, rather than gentlemanly, in disciplining and taking action against those who abused his trust and exploited him for personal gain.

But my greatest regret was the fact that the BN leadership failed to take seriously and act decisively on the various warning signs that indicated the entire system was on the verge of collapse.

There will be many books that attempt to explain what went wrong for the ruling party in the 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections (GE14) and the causes of the fall of the BN Government. There will be even more on the struggles of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition in wresting away power from BN in order to provide a New Hope for a New Malaysia. All these have a place in history.

However, what this book does in the following chapters, is to tell the story of a true 'gentleman politician' who was trained and mentored in the customs of an outmoded political tradition, and who, after having the levers of power handed to him, had tried in vain to save an already crumbling ruling coalition and a collapsing socio-political system.

It is also the story of how Najib's bold moves to reform a Government, empower the people and change the system, were continually undermined and even sabotaged by the very individuals and groups who were supposed to support him and be the voice and the will of the people.

It also tells of how the political Opposition, PH, was able to build on the disenchantment and anger felt by a large proportion of Malaysians after decades of wealth inequality, systemic corruption, political patronage, racial polarization, and the self-entitled attitude of some of those in the circles of power. And it explains why PH was able to bring down the BN Government, not because the majority of Malaysians necessarily believed in the Opposition's promises, but because the Malays were seriously disunited and because people were sick and tired of the rot, infighting and terminal dysfunction of a system that, ironically, had been inherited from the country's fourth Prime Minister, and who these very same people voted in to replace Najib, as the country's seventh Prime Minister.

I had a front row seat to much of the action, privy to the discussions in the halls of power as storm after political storm buffeted the Najib Razak administration which, rightly or wrongly, tried to deal with it using numerous tools and strategies, some long outmoded. To paraphrase Yeats, the centre could no longer hold, as the best lacked all conviction, while the worst were full of passionate intensity.

From surviving the 13<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE13) amid street protests, heightened racial tensions and with a ruling coalition subjected to the whims of political warlords and crony capitalists, Najib Razak and his Government were not prepared nor did many know how to deal with new realities following the onslaught of crises that hit them, like the sudden disappearance of MH370 and the shooting down of MH17.

But the ‘Whale’ of all crises came in the form of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal. In their book, *Billion Dollar Whale*, Bradley Hope and Tom Wright have written a very compelling account of how a little-known financier named Jho Low had used his relationship with Najib to siphon billions of dollars from the Malaysian investment fund.

But the truth of what happened when the scandal broke in July 2015, was even stranger. We all know about the billions that were allegedly stolen but here for the first-time readers will understand why, when the sordid details of what had transpired blew up in public, the Malaysian Government kept an ‘elegant silence’ and then tried to explain away what happened.

Unveiled for the very first time, are the inner workings of the Prime Minister’s Office and those of Najib’s senior officials, many of whom were stunned by the revelations and who did not know what to do. And how this culture of not questioning one’s superior, operating in silos, and not trying to find out what actually happened, led to a disastrous split within the country’s leadership and ruling coalition, thus giving the Opposition the stone with which to slay its Goliath.

This book will hopefully provide readers with a better understanding of the highest levels of modern Malaysian politics over the last decade and provide an insider’s view of what transpired within the rooms and

offices of the fifth floor of Perdana Putra. A lesson on what it takes to be in power, and a warning on how it can be lost.

Writing this book would not have been possible without the amazing kindness and friendship shown to me by so many of the people mentioned in this book and many others who have asked to remain anonymous, in the thirteen years that I lived, worked, and consulted in Malaysia. I dedicate this book to all of them, who continue to fight for a better Malaysia, because regardless of the political party in power, they love their country above all else. However, I remain responsible for any mistakes or errors made. Please feel free to email me at [romen@hotmail.com](mailto:romen@hotmail.com) should you wish to comment or provide me with material for a future edition of this book.

To all those who disagree with my version of events, assessments, analysis, or views (that is your right) and to those with political agendas or seeking to make a name for themselves online or in print, by hurling allegations and slander in a bid to discredit me, please don't bother. As they say, I have no skin in the game. So, please don't shoot the messenger. However, do heed the message.

And finally, I dedicate this book to my amazing wife Brigid and our three lovely daughters Lara, Olive, and Cilla, for not only putting up with my crazy work schedules and long disappearances overseas, but for also surviving the writing of this manuscript.

Romen Bose  
London  
18 March 2021

## Chapter 1

# The Night Najib Razak and The BN Government Fell

Before you read about the night it all ended, here is a thumbnail primer on Malaysian history and politics to help put things in context and understand what transpired.

The election defeat of Prime Minister Najib Razak on the night of 9 May 2018 was only the second major seismic event after the 13 May 1969 Race Riots, to rock Malaysia's history since the end of British colonial rule in 1957.

In those sixty-one years, only a single party, the Malay-based United Malays National Organization (UMNO) along with a coalition of non-Malay parties, including the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), collectively known as Barisan Nasional or BN, had governed the Southeast Asian Constitutional monarchy. Its race-based policies giving the Malays special rights and a leg up, were supposed to be balanced out through an unwritten social compact with the other major races in the country, namely the Chinese, Indians (and later the east Malaysians) and which roughly translated to an unofficial agreement that the Malays would rule the country while the Chinese would run the economy.

This was a fine policy for the 1950s and the 1960s but with racial riots in the country in 1969 due to the wealth disparity between the Malays and Chinese, greater Malay rights and an affirmative action policy for Malays were implemented by Najib's father, Tun Abdul Razak, then the country's second Prime Minister. Again, this was acceptable and worked relatively well into the 1980s. But then, many of these Bumiputera (son of the soil) rules and regulations began to be exploited and abused under the administration of the country's fourth Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Although Mahathir's administration brought in amazing progress for the country and people in the 1990s and early 2000s, he along with his anointed deputy Anwar Ibrahim, also brought about a wave of almost Wahhabi-like Islamization to the laid-back nation, politicizing the religion and marking the beginnings of significant racial tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Mahathir fell out with Anwar in 1998, who was convicted and served a jail sentence for sodomy and corruption. Anwar decided to fight back and upon his release in 2004, banded together with the till then negligible Opposition to form the Pakatan Rakyat and later Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition. In the meantime, Mahathir handed over power in 2003 to his chosen successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who won the biggest ever election victory for the ruling coalition in the country's 11<sup>th</sup> General Elections in 2004. But within a few years, Mahathir became disenchanted with the country's fifth Prime Minister. With increasing racial tensions, high pump prices and a global economic crisis affecting the country, Abdullah Badawi and his deputy Najib, faced an uphill task in governing the country, but with Mahathir now plotting to overthrow him, Abdullah never stood a chance.

Mahathir's machinations along with an increasingly vocal Opposition demanding greater electoral reforms, an end to systemic Government corruption and a greater voice for non-Malays, saw the ruling coalition lose its two-thirds majority in Parliament and control of the states of Selangor, Penang, Perak, Kelantan and Terengganu for the first time in history to Anwar Ibrahim's Pakatan Rakyat Opposition coalition. This was a major debacle for BN and everyone blamed Abdullah for the results, forcing him to step down. Mahathir, who had trained and mentored Najib, believed that the son of Tun Razak

would follow his wishes to the letter and so through backroom deals and politicking, tried to ensure that the Deputy Prime Minister would replace Abdullah and become Malaysia's sixth Prime Minister on 3 April 2009.

Najib, just like Abdullah, had big plans at the start of his administration to reform the Government and system but circumstances and the inherently corrupt system of patronage that they had both inherited from Mahathir, meant that much of what they tried to do was effectively deep-sixed.

However, this does not absolve them of the many bad decisions and U-turns that were made based on suspect advice and vested interests. Initially scrapping the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allowed for indefinite detention without trial, Najib later allowed detention without trial but for a fixed period. After promising to remove the draconian Sedition Act used by some of his predecessors as a tool to silence the Opposition, he was forced, due to realpolitik, to backtrack on it. Najib was also alleged to be involved in the murder of a Mongolian model (since disproven after GE14<sup>1,2</sup>) and social media, which had become an alternative source of news for many Malaysians, was filled with anger over the allegedly high-flying lifestyle of Najib's family. These, along with increasing racial tensions and what appeared to be no change in the same race-based rules and levels of corruption, meant that the Opposition, fresh from its successes in GE12 and numerous by-elections since then, would now go for broke in trying to topple the Government. By now, Mahathir had once again become disillusioned with his second successor and although vocal, still backed the Government but only just.

The results of GE13 were a further blow to the Government. Although Najib still managed to form the Government, his coalition

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that many in the then Opposition have now backtracked on this allegation with veteran DAP politician Lim Kit Siang saying that he never accused Najib of the murders.

<sup>2</sup> Santa Maria Chin, Emmanuel. 'Kit Siang: I never accused Najib of murders but said do not evade responsibility as PM', The Malay Mail, 4 May 2019. Accessed at <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/05/04/kit-siang-i-never-accused-najib-of-murders-but-said-do-not-evade-responsibi/1749750>.

had only won 47 per cent of the popular vote, with the Opposition still retaining Selangor, Penang, Perak, and Kelantan. In addition, Opposition claims of an alleged 40,000 Bangladeshis being flown into Malaysia to vote for the Government and blackouts at poll counting centres created much anger that led to demonstrations following the polls. Although both were later debunked<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>, they have now become a sort of political urban legend among many. Najib's second term ended up being a series of crisis after crisis with the disappearance of flight MH370 and the shooting down of flight MH17. By now, Mahathir saw that his chosen successor would also not do his bidding and had to be removed. But it would not be easy to remove two sitting Prime Ministers in a row. However, Mahathir would not have to do much, as a brewing scandal involving a Malaysian Government investment fund known as 1MDB would pretty much help him marshal his forces, this time from Anwar's Pakatan Harapan alliance. In one of the most bizarre situations in Malaysian political history, Anwar and Mahathir, the man who had jailed Anwar and destroyed his career, were now partners in a bid to topple UMNO, the party which Mahathir had led and effectively shaped while in power with Anwar as his deputy.

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It is very hard to pinpoint exactly when I realized that something was not right, but several things happened in the weeks leading up to

<sup>3</sup> Lee, Patrick. 'Allegations of Bangladeshis voting in GE13 absurd, says High Commissioner', The Star Online, 3 June 2013. Accessed at <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2013/06/03/allegations-of-bangladeshis-voting-in-ge13-absurd-says-high-commissioner>.

<sup>4</sup> Shagar, Loshana K. 'Anwar clarifies claim of 40,000 dubious voters are not Bangladeshis alone', The Star Online, 20 November 2013. Accessed at <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2013/11/20/parliament-dubious-voter-bangla>.

<sup>5</sup> 'EC: Photograph of 'blackout' on polling day was a lie', The Star Online, 24 May 2013. Accessed at <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2013/05/24/ec-photograph-of-blackout-on-polling-day-was-a-lie>.

<sup>6</sup> 'There was no blackout says DAP', malaysia-today.net, 8 May 2013. Accessed at <https://www.malaysia-today.net/2013/05/08/there-was-no-blackout-says-dap/>.

the elections that should have triggered greater concern or interest. But didn't.

We were all waiting for the major 'bombshell' that the Opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition was supposed to drop, a week or even days before Polling Day. And as it drew nearer and there was no sign of any such move, I began to get more and more nervous. But, like most others, I ignored it and blamed my worry on my nerves, because everyone, including the most seasoned analysts, were calling it a Barisan Nasional victory, long before the day itself.

By the first week of May, I was getting very anxious as there was no sign of any real Opposition offensive. Even though the BN War Room and grassroots leaders across the country were reporting strong support for BN, our proprietary DEFCO social media sentiment analysis software was showing something altogether different. We had updated DEFCO with the latest re-delineation data, including the latest electoral roll data that was drilled down to the PDM (polling district) level.

Our updated election forecast based on social media analytics indicated that the worst-case scenario (which is what we used as a conservative benchmark for forecasts) for BN would see the Government coalition secure only 117 out of the 222 parliamentary seats. This was worrying because conservative estimates from other internal Government election forecasts were predicting that BN would secure close to 130 seats in a worst-case scenario.

Our internal analysis also noted that, 'with an all-time low forecast of 5 per cent of Chinese support level for BN, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) President Liow Tiong Lai's seat and most other MCA seats would likely fall to the Opposition. Most other BN-component parties like MCA would be unable to defend their seats or recapture them from the Opposition.'

More importantly, DEFCO had forecast the fall of Johor state. Our analysis concluded that BN would, 'see Johor being captured by the Opposition, as the huge (forecasted) loss of Parliament seats in the southern state would likely indicate a transfer of power in local DUNs (state legislative assembly seats) to PH. The parliamentary constituencies of concern in Johor include Segamat, Labis, Pagoh,

Ledang, Bakri, Muar, Batu Pahat, Kluang, Tebrau, Pasir Gudang, Pulai, Iskandar Puteri, Kulai and Tanjung Piai.’ As forecasted, these seats were all lost to PH in GE14.

The fact that we forecasted the fall of the southern state of Johor, which was UMNO’s strongest bastion and the state where the party was founded back in 1946, was earth-shattering to my team and I.

This was because it had always been received wisdom that the fall of Johor would mean the fall of UMNO. To borrow from Macbeth, the fall of Johor was UMNO’s version of Great Birnam wood coming to high Dunsinane hill. Thus, the fact that there was even a likelihood that Johor could be lost to the Opposition, was unthinkable.

I met with Najib close to midnight on 2 May 2018 (seven days before Polling Day on 9 May 2018) to brief him on the internal findings and the worst-case scenario facing BN. Najib had just returned to his Jalan Langgak Duta residence, after several weeks of gruelling campaigning and was having a very late dinner with his wife, Datin Sri Hajah Rosmah, and son, Ashman. I could see the fatigue in his face and the tiredness in his movements yet he still cracked jokes and spoke at length to Rosmah, trying to maintain some semblance of a family life, despite the numerous calls on his mobile phone and urgent election matters that needed his attention. I told him that I could come back later but he insisted on sitting down with me, despite his weary state to go over the current ground analysis.

Najib appeared quite taken aback by the analysis. He said he was very surprised to see that our social-media based analysis had differed so significantly from what his ground sources, party leadership, and division chiefs were telling him.

He found it very hard to reconcile the extreme positions, saying that other analysts and experts were confident of a much greater win. Although our analysis included ground sentiments and demographic as well as geographic trends, the conventional wisdom at that point was that even though social media analysis indicated such a big loss, it needed to be weighed together with other factors because it did not include the canvassing on the ground, those areas with poor internet

penetration and even the large number of people who did not use the internet to express their views or concerns.

Najib said he would raise my concerns over Johor with Defence Minister and UMNO Vice-President, Hishammuddin Hussein, who was also in charge of BN's election machinery in Johor.

Najib believed that by using data analytics company True Vox's newly-created system in choosing BN candidates for each constituency, giving election funds directly to the candidates themselves instead of to the division chiefs, and by providing cash handouts and election sweeteners to voters (as he eventually did during his election wrap-up speech in Pekan on the night of 8 May 2018), that he would have a good chance of securing a strong mandate from the people.

He said that according to the party's latest forecasts, BN would secure at least 140 to 150 parliamentary seats and there was a strong chance of BN getting a two-thirds majority on Election Day.

As election day approached, the ongoing social media war became more intense and the various disparate social media teams began meeting on a daily basis in KL Sentral in order to coordinate the online messaging and campaigns being carried out. This included the teams under Najib's branding chief Farid Ridzuan, Najib's special officer Amhari Efendi Nazaruddin, media officer Akmar Mokhles, press secretary Tengku Sharifuddin, political secretary Lokman Adam, the UMNO IT network (JITU), the BN Information Team under Dr Baharuddin as well as the National Communications Team (NCT). Several other 'grey' communications teams were also invited to be part of the coordinating group but I never knew what these teams did nor who they reported to.

The grouping was now chaired by Tengku Sharifuddin and Amhari, who oversaw the economy portfolio along with several other key portfolios in the PM's Office. The team offices had been leased by Amhari's new company. His earlier firm, Orbs Solutions, had been dissolved after it was alleged by online portal Sarawak Report in 2016 as having been funded using 1MDB-linked funds.

At the daily meetings, plans and strategies were discussed as to how to counter Opposition's social media postings and attacks but it became very clear from the outset that instead of dismantling the Opposition's arguments and looking at how to tackle the concerns of the voters and addressing those needs as a priority, the team now known as Skuad Putih (White Squad) was ordered to continually highlight what I believe was a fatally-flawed BN Manifesto, justifying the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and attempting to discredit the Opposition.

Taking a strong focus on the Manifesto was the direction that was allegedly set by the BN War Room, chaired by a close associate of the PM, Tan Sri Alies Anor. Amhari and Tengku attended those meetings daily and then carried the instructions of the War Room over to the Skuad Putih meetings.

As a result of the strong focus on highlighting the lacklustre and personality-driven BN Manifesto, the meetings became more concerned with whether voters were happy with the BN Manifesto and with keeping the Manifesto at the top of voter's minds, rather than focusing on specific parts of the Manifesto that would solve the needs of the people, or provide them with a good reason to vote for BN.

This meant that the Skuad Putih meetings ended up getting a very 'positive' feel of the ground as the statistics they were looking at were limited to Manifesto issues. This also meant that a decrease in online criticism of the Manifesto (rather than an increase in positive comments online) was taken as a positive endorsement of it.

To be fair, the 1MDB issue along with the cost of living, jobs for youth and security were also focus areas but most did not register as virally negative from the statistics that were displayed on the TV screens in the meeting room.

As such, no one felt that these issues were 'out of control' and most felt that these negative issues had already been 'priced in' by voters and that despite it all, these voters were still willing to vote for BN.

However, the reality was that most voters were fed up with what they believed were the Government's lies on 1MDB and so had

stopped listening. As such, most no longer reacted to stories or articles on these issues because they had already made up their minds that the Government was covering things up and were lying to them. I also believe that the War Room did not pay enough attention to the fact that the Malay vote was severely fractured and that UMNO/BN had to do something drastic to try and win back a Malay majority. This was something that would have devastating consequences.

It was decided by 7 May 2018 that the Skwad Putih meetings would be shifted to the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC), where the UMNO and BN headquarters were located, so that it could be closer to the BN War Room and be able to react to any sudden social media crisis or situation that might erupt in the last two days of the election campaign.

As such, Skwad Putih began meeting in PWTC, commandeering the big conference room at the BN secretariat on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor.

The mood was very good on Election Day as everyone was expecting a reasonable win for BN, with the entire team assembling in the conference room by 9 a.m.

However, within minutes, there were reports from across the country that the mobile phones of most BN candidates were facing a denial-of-service attack, which jammed up communications between candidates and the various party operations rooms and coordination teams. I am uncertain if any action was taken to rectify the situation but we paid little attention to it as we were busy with our work and investigating the issue would be the job of the security services. We did not realize the impact of this at the time, but it was to have very serious consequences at the end of the day.

I was at PWTC by 10 a.m. and everyone was anxious about the results but information coming from the BN War Room indicated, by 2 or 3 p.m., that large numbers of 'white voters' (BN pollsters divided voters into three categories: white voters were voters who would almost always vote for BN, grey voters were those who were undecided and who could be tempted to vote for BN while black voters were those who would almost always vote for the Opposition) had gone to vote so it would likely help increase votes for BN candidates across the country.

At 3 p.m., I went over to Najib's house to get him to do a pre-record of a Radio Broadcast, which we would release on 9th or 10th May, to 'wrap-up' the elections, call for unity among the people, and to thank them for installing BN for another five years. That recording would never be aired.

Najib had only just flown in from Pekan and he was in a very good mood. It was clear that the morning had gone well for him when he voted in his home constituency and he was looking forward to going to UMNO and BN's headquarters at PWTC to follow the election results, once BN formed the Government.

When I was done recording, I asked Najib what he was seeing in terms of numbers. He said that from his latest conversation with the War Room, he was expecting between 130 to 140 seats for BN. He also said that from exit polling data of the number of white voters who had turned out to vote, BN was also likely to take back several Opposition seats including Lumut, Temerloh and Raub.

However, what we did not know was that there had been an internal sabotage of UMNO/BN's election monitoring and coordination software. It was so innocuous that most canvassers and party election workers did not realize its significance, and those who did chose to ignore it.

The Wanita or women's wing of UMNO, and the Puteri or young women's wing of the party were responsible for administering the GOTV (Get Out the Vote) programme in every constituency and PDM. Months before any election, the Wanita and Puteri would visit almost every household/voter in the constituency and help determine if they were white (pro-BN), grey (fence-sitter), or black (Opposition) voters. This data, along with addresses and ID card numbers would then be input into UMNO's sophisticated centralized computer system that would then compile all the lists. On election day, the system would generate lists identifying the three groups, their addresses, and the colour code of the household/voter. Wanita/Puteri would then ensure that they visited each white household or voter and got them to either come out to vote, or provide transportation to ensure that these white voters could get to the polling station to vote.

However, in early 2018 the old software was changed. Instead of generating a list identifying the three different categories, each GOTV team was given a single spreadsheet of data. The problem was that the provided spreadsheet did not identify which were white, grey, and black voters. As such, all Puteri/Wanita GOTV teams across the country assumed that the list must be all white.

As a result, the entire GOTV system broke down as GOTV teams attempted to get each and every person on their spreadsheet list to vote.

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16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B	16	MAZAL B
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18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA	18	ABO MA
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20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B	20	AFRAN B

Screenshot of GE14 voter data provided to UMNO Wanita and Puteri using the changed GOTV software. Note that there is no column indicating which voters are 'white', 'grey' or 'black'. As such, the assumption made on the ground was that all the voters listed were 'white' when that was not the case.

So, instead of just ferrying white supporters to the polling booths, the GOTV teams were doing the Opposition an enormous favour by also ferrying Opposition voters by the droves. A bonus for the Opposition was the fact that the GOTV teams had helped those Opposition voters who would have otherwise not have gone out to vote in the election, to turn up to vote, as the GOTV teams provided them with transport to the polling booth.

Thus, given the suddenly huge numbers they were ferrying, the GOTV teams were overwhelmed and the system broke down, something that the GOTV teams were not expecting based on the number of people their training and practice sessions had prepared them for. Surprisingly, during the practice sessions, there was no

coordination between Wanita and Puteri so the teams did not realize the numbers they would be transporting until the actual day itself.

When some Puteri members realized the mistake and raised the issue of not having colour codes with their seniors, they were just ignored or given excuses as the seniors themselves did not want to lose face and admit that the new software was seriously flawed.

As a result, a large number of Opposition voters, who would not have otherwise voted, ended up voting in constituencies where BN had slim margins, and this very likely caused BN to lose those seats.

But UMNO/BN headquarters was not informed of this, nor did they realize what happened until the following day. Of course, this was not the sole cause of the election rout but it did contribute to the overall loss.

In the meantime, the BN War Room, oblivious to what had transpired on the ground, were still expecting a good victory. Najib told me that by 6.30 p.m., he was convinced that BN would have a significant victory as even Selangor UMNO Chairman Noh Omar called to tell him that it was likely BN would form the state Government in the Opposition-controlled state.

When the Election Committee (EC) announced that there was less than 80 per cent voter turnout around 8 p.m., everyone cheered in the conference room as it was received wisdom that a lower turnout would mean more votes for BN.

By then, I had returned to PWTC to await the EC's announcements for the various constituencies. We were hoping to get news first from the BN War room but it was tightly-guarded and very little information was coming out so we had no idea as to what was going on or what the figures were.

We were all awaiting Najib's arrival at PWTC, which was slotted for 8.30 p.m., as it was expected that by then, it would be quite clear that BN had formed the Government. Najib was expected to go to the thirty-eighth floor and watch the results before holding a press conference to announce BN's victory.

However, I realized that something was not right when 8.30 p.m. came and went and Najib still had not arrived at the scene. The mood

started to get a lot more serious and sober in the various rooms by 10 p.m. as very few results were trickling in and many seats appeared to be going to Pakatan.

Then rumours began coming in of huge defeats faced by BN candidates across the country. Most of these rumours turned out to be true. A good friend in Gerakan, one of BN's coalition of parties, Ivanpal Grewal, messaged me to say that the party's President Mah Siew Keong had lost his Teluk Intan seat despite the fierce fight he had put up. Ivan said, 'I feel so betrayed by the voters in Teluk Intan because they took our assistance and help and promised to vote for us, but then stabbed us in the back. Even before they went into the polling booth this morning, they were telling me they would vote for BN, but did just the opposite. I'm on the verge of breaking down.' He said that Liow Tiong Lai, the President of MCA, another BN coalition member, had also lost his seat and so had Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) President S. Subramaniam. The majority of BN's main coalition parties had been wiped out.

And still, the main election dashboard in our conference room was showing BN in the lead. It was surreal.

A friend of mine had managed to sneak into the War Room a little after 9 p.m. and when he came down to the eighth floor, he was as white as a sheet. He told me that the initial figures from BN's exit polls showed significant wins for BN across the country but once the results began coming in, they did not tally with the exit polls, with seats that should have been sure-wins falling to the Opposition by very narrow margins, and almost all marginal seats being lost to the Opposition.

However, as the evening progressed, it became obvious to the War Room that BN did not have the numbers to form the Government. By 10 p.m., it was obvious to Najib and the War Room that BN would struggle to form the Government even with more than a third of the seats still to be counted. It was obvious that BN had been badly mauled and was unlikely to survive.

By midnight, the atmosphere was very tense in the conference room as very little information was coming from the War Room and the minimal EC results on the TV just added to the gloom.

Around 12.30 a.m., Amhari and Tengku, who were both in the War Room from early evening, came into the conference room. The look on their faces said it all.

Amhari said that the War Room could not understand what happened as they believed that the vast majority of BN's white voters had cast their ballots and yet when the results came out, the Opposition had secured wins all over the place.

Amhari said there was 'blood everywhere' as all the component parties had effectively been wiped out, with numerous ministers and deputy ministers losing their seats. Even Najib's majority in his home seat of Pekan had been reduced.

He said that the War Room had disbanded in chaos, and that most of them were now headed to Najib's house to huddle and to figure out what to do next.

Following the meeting, a large number of those gathered began changing out of their blue BN shirts and into their regular clothing as it was obvious that there would be no celebrations.

Moreover, most wanted to escape the glare of the media, which had gathered outside PWTC in full force since 5 p.m., and many of whom were still unaware of the full import of what had happened. I walked out of the conference room in a state of shock and my feet began to wobble as I collapsed into a sofa lining the wall outside the room, and waited a few minutes until the shock of what had just happened passed. I then snuck out using the rear elevators and got into my car at the convention centre entrance, rather than the UMNO building entrance, which by then had been surrounded by the media.

I then made my way to Najib's house, where several media organizations had already gathered, along with a large contingent of police special forces. I made my way through the heavily guarded entrance and entered the residence, after being recognized and allowed in by the PM's personal security detail.

The scene in Jalan Langgak Duta at 1.30 a.m. on 10 May 2018, was surreal.

All the lights in the building and in the grounds surrounding it were brightly lit, as if in anticipation of a party or soirée but the

tables and chairs that had been set up in the compound were empty. It looked like a party had been abandoned, taking on an aura of a ghost town. However, piles and piles of shoes were stacked outside the steps leading into the house. Once inside, the sense of panic and desperation was palpable.

There were people milling all over the ground floor of the bungalow house but most were silent and staring at their smart phones and devices while others had shell-shocked looks on their faces.

Just outside the main reception room, Hishammuddin's son Faris was seated along with Hishammuddin's wife and next to her was Deputy Premier Zahid Hamidi's wife. They were in tears. Defeated-looking War Room officials were all seated around the sofas outside Najib's private office, along with Najib's chief of staff Iskandar Kaus, special officer Wan Shihab, political secretary Khairun Aseh, lawyer Hafarizam Harun, political strategist Habibul Rahman, Amhari, Tengku, special officer Saiful Baharom, former special officer Ravin Ponniah, along with Najib's daughter Gina, her husband Daniyar, Najib's son Nor Ashman and several others. Most were on their handphones making calls or reading incoming news feeds, while other just stared into space, a lost look on their faces. The following conversations I recall from memory and from the notes that I jotted down after returning to my hotel room. Any mistakes are my own.

A few minutes later, a senior adviser approached me, saying, 'We cannot allow Mahathir to take power illegally, you must help the Boss, he cannot hand over power without trying to form the Government, he must fight till the end.'

I told him that the BN component parties would rally behind Najib but looking at me with a weary expression on his face, he said, 'BN has ceased to exist. The entire coalition has collapsed in the last few hours, we are on our own.' I was stunned. How could a sixty-one-year-old coalition that had been through thick and thin simply cease to exist? But that night, that was exactly what had happened. The majority of BN's component parties in peninsula Malaysia had been wiped out and all communication and coordination had ended temporarily with the defeat.

**An unparalleled political blockbuster of intrigue, disaster, incompetence and the biggest financial scandal the world has ever seen**

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