KAJIAN MALAYSIA Vol. 44, No.2, 2026, 115–136

REASSESSING THE NEW MALAYSIA: LEADERSHIP ISSUES, REFORM PROMISES, AND THE THREE CORE PARADIGMS OF PAKATAN HARAPAN

Mohd Syakir Mohd Rosdi

Centre for Islamic Development Management Studies (ISDEV), Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

Email: mohdsyakir@usm.my

Published online: 30 October 2026

To cite this article: Mohd Syakir Mohd Rosdi. 2026. Reassessing the New Malaysia: Leadership issues, reform promises, and the three core paradigm of Pakatan Harapan. *Kajian Malaysia* 44(2): 115-136. https://doi.org/10.21315/km2026.44.2.6

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.21315/km2026.44.2.6

ABSTRACT

This article examines the leadership paradigm of the New Malaysia government following the victory of Pakatan Harapan (PH) in Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE14). The New Malaysia can be described as a reimagined Malaysia under the dominance of PH in the GE14. PH successfully defeated Barisan Nasional (BN) with a clear majority. The popularity of the New Malaysia government led by PH is largely attributed to four factors shaping the Malaysian public's voting paradigm. First, people wanted to defeat Najib; second, they sought to overthrow the BN government, perceived as oppressive; third, they wanted better welfare than the BN government provided; and fourth, they wanted Tun Mahathir to return to power. Specifically, it addresses the following research question. What leadership paradigm underpinned the early governance approach of the New Malaysia administration, and how can it be analytically understood within contemporary political leadership discourse? While the electoral transition from BN to PH marked a significant shift, scholarly assessment of the governing paradigm that emerged afterwards remains limited. Public discourse often emphasises electoral motivations, including public dissatisfaction with former Prime Minister Najib Razak, rejection of the BN administration, expectations of improved welfare governance, and support for Mahathir Mohamad's return. However, systematic academic analysis of the leadership framework that shaped the early phase of the New Malaysia government remains underdeveloped. This study employs qualitative document and content analysis of selected secondary sources, including scholarly analyses and institutional reports relevant to governance transitions during the New Malaysia period. The study coded data thematically to identify recurring leadership principles and governance orientations. The findings suggest that the early leadership paradigm of the New Malaysia government can be conceptualised through three core dimensions: openness, equality, and unity. These dimensions collectively reflect an attempt to

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reposition governance practices within a reform-oriented framework following electoral transition. The study contributes to the literature on political leadership and democratic transition by providing a structured analytical interpretation of leadership paradigm formation in post-electoral change contexts.

Keywords: New Malaysia, Pakatan Harapan, leadership paradigm, reform

INTRODUCTION

9 May 2018 marked a historic moment, witnessing a change of government in Malaysia. For 61 years, Barisan Nasional (BN) governed Malaysia. The political landscape has now shifted to the opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), comprising the People's Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), National Trust Party (AMANAH), and Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM), in collaboration with the regional party from Sabah, the Sabah Heritage Party (WARISAN). This landmark event reflects the awakening of the Malaysian populace, eager for change across multiple spheres, particularly in addressing the increasingly burdensome economic conditions faced by citizens.

The peaceful transition of power through a general election, without provocation, offers a renewed beacon of hope to the global community, demonstrating that democracy continues to thrive, especially within the context of the Islamic world. This episode further highlights the maturity of the Malaysian electorate, effecting change through the ballot rather than through warfare or violence.

Following PH's electoral success, Mohamad Raimi (2018) noted that Malaysia, once renowned internationally for its strong image, has reclaimed its position as a reference point for leading the voice of the Muslim ummah in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. He further emphasised that Malaysia must engage in introspection to cleanse governance from major scandals that have tarnished the nation's reputation, while simultaneously rebuilding and strengthening the foundations of a sovereign and dignified state. His concern reflects the critical importance of effective leadership under PH.

To address these issues, this study aims to examine the leadership paradigm of the PH government. The discussion is organised into three sections: first, the concept of a paradigm; second, the paradigm before the 14th General Election (GE14); and third, the leadership paradigm of the PH government in the New Malaysia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in document analysis and qualitative content analysis (Bowen 2009; Schreier 2012). The data consist of selected secondary documents produced during the initial phase of the PH administration following the GE14. Secondary sources include scholarly analyses and institutional reports relevant to governance transition during the New Malaysia period. Document analysis is particularly appropriate for examining political discourse and governance orientation, as it enables systematic interpretation of recorded texts within their sociopolitical context (Bowen 2009).

Documents were selected using purposive sampling (Patton 2015) based on two criteria: (1) direct relevance to leadership articulation and governance direction, and (2) issuance within the early governing period to capture the foundational leadership orientation. This form of criterion-based selection ensures analytical relevance and depth rather than statistical representativeness.

The analytical process followed a systematic qualitative content analysis procedure (Schreier 2012; Mayring 2014). First, all documents were read iteratively to establish contextual familiarity and preliminary thematic orientation (Braun and Clarke 2006). Second, open coding was conducted to identify recurring leadership-related concepts and governance themes. Third, codes were grouped into broader analytical categories through axial coding procedures adapted from grounded theory techniques (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Finally, thematic synthesis was undertaken to construct higher-order dimensions representing the underlying leadership paradigm.

To strengthen analytical rigour, the researcher maintained coding consistency by repeatedly cross-checking themes across documents and systematically refining the coding frame (Schreier 2012). Interpretative validation was conducted by comparing emergent themes with established political leadership theories to ensure theoretical coherence and analytical robustness. The study also addressed credibility and transparency in qualitative interpretation, consistent with trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This methodological approach allows for a structured, rigorous, and transparent examination of how leadership principles were articulated and institutionalised during the formative stage of the New Malaysia administration.

THE CONCEPT OF PARADIGM

The term paradigm originates from the Greek word paradigm. In English, it is called paradigm, and in French, it is also called paradigm. Etymologically, the prefix para from Latin means "beside" or "alongside," and "digm" means to show, model, example, or ideal. In its verbal form, digm means to demonstrate or present something, carrying the sense of a model, form, or example (Rosdi and Jackson 2020). In essence, a paradigm can be understood as a method of perceiving a situation or condition based on general assumptions and as a guide to achieving success within a given context or set of constraints.

The term paradigm is often associated with patterns of thinking or problem-solving techniques humans use. It was first introduced by the scholar Thomas Kuhn (1970) in his seminal work The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Initially, Kuhn (1970) did not provide a detailed definition; the term was primarily used as key terminology within the framework of scientific knowledge development. Later, the concept was elaborated more clearly by Friedrichs (1970).

Several definitions of paradigm have since been proposed. Kuhn (1970) defined a paradigm as a foundational way of thinking or basic concept adopted as a model or pattern by scientists in their scholarly pursuits, relying on empirical and theoretical studies. Friedrichs (1970) described a paradigm as a collection of values that shapes an individual's thought patterns, forming a subjective perspective of reality that, in turn, determines how one approaches and manages that reality. Ritzer (1975) emphasised the role of paradigms in guiding scholars regarding the core issues that should be studied within a specific branch of knowledge.

In summary, paradigms are closely linked to fundamental principles that shape human perspectives of the world as part of an exploratory system. A paradigm typically comprises three main elements: methodology, epistemology, and ontology. Through these elements, humans employ paradigms to acquire knowledge about the world and understand various phenomena (Rosdi and Jackson 2020).

The formation of paradigms is also influenced by emerging issues that help align collective thinking. In the Malaysian context, four primary issues have shaped the public's paradigm: first, the rejection of Dato' Seri Najib Razak; second, the desire to overthrow an oppressive government; third, the demand for improved welfare; and fourth, the wish for Tun Mahathir to return to power.

Public Rejection of Dato' Seri Najib Razak

The first issue concerns a significant number of PH leaders. PH made it its primary objective to win the people's hearts by promoting negative perceptions of Dato' Seri Najib Razak's leadership. This paradigm penetrated deeply into the minds of many Malaysians who desired a change in national leadership. These negative perceptions grew stronger as they were repeatedly projected onto Dato' Seri Najib Razak, focusing on integrity, the economy, the cost of living, corruption, and other issues that fuelled public anger towards the government led by Dato' Seri Mohd Najib Tun Razak.

PH leaders repeatedly raised these issues daily. The 1MDB controversy, for example, became widely discussed even internationally. In addition, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) issue, which burdened people increasingly pressured by rising prices, intensified public dissatisfaction. These two major issues damaged Dato' Seri Najib Razak's credibility in the public eye because no effective changes or optimal solutions were seen. The BN government was perceived as a kleptocratic regime, referring to a government controlled by those who plunder the wealth of the people.

As Fukuyama (2015) and Diamond (2016) observed, global politics over the past decade has experienced political decay. At the same time, democratic practices in many countries have continued to decline. In developed nations, the three pillars essential to the success of democracy in modern governance, the rule of law and accountability have become increasingly robust. However, in developing countries, these three elements have deteriorated. Institutions that are supposed to represent the voice and interests of the people in a democratic system have been manipulated to protect the interests of a select group of ruling elites. This leadership crisis has contributed to the weakening of representative democracy (Mohamad Raimi 2018).

On 19 April 2018, the news portal *Malaysiakini* (2018b) reported that a Financial Times study showed Prime Minister Dato' Seri Najib Razak's popularity was lower in urban areas. The findings, summarised in a chart by FT Confidential Research (FTCR), were based on a survey of 1,000 urban respondents across Malaysia and indicated that Najib's popularity had nearly reached 10% in the first quarter (Q1) of the year. The FTCR report titled "Malaysia's Election Will Be a Surprise" did not disclose Najib's exact popularity rating (FT Confidential Research 2018).

The chart clearly showed Najib's support dropping from 80% in the fourth quarter (Q4) of 2015 to 50% in Q1 of the current year. FTCR did not elaborate on its methodology. In contrast, a Merdeka Centre (2015) survey of 1,028 Peninsula Malaysia voters selected at random in May 2010 showed Najib's popularity at

72%. By the end of 2014, Merdeka Centre reported that Najib's popularity had fallen below 50%. Subsequently, Najib's popularity figures were no longer published by Merdeka Centre. Meanwhile, the FTCR chart indicated that 31.1% of respondents did not reject the idea of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad becoming Prime Minister again. Only 22.5% opposed the suggestion, while 46.3% were neutral (*Malaysiakini* 2018b).

Another survey involving 252 respondents from Malay-majority areas, including Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Hulu Perak, showed that 51.8% were dissatisfied with the economic situation. Only 23.7% were satisfied, while 24.5% remained neutral. Regarding the current political situation, 50.2% expressed dissatisfaction, while only 23.7% were satisfied.

This first paradigm may be summarised as follows: the people believed that Dato' Seri Najib Razak, as Prime Minister, was incapable of fulfilling the responsibility of restoring the nation. Therefore, the public felt that Dato' Seri Najib Razak should be removed in the GE14.

Table 1 summarises the first issue: widespread public dissatisfaction with Dato' Seri Najib Razak's leadership, driven by concerns over integrity, economic management, the cost of living, and corruption, particularly the 1MDB scandal and GST implementation. PH leveraged these negative perceptions to galvanise support for change. Empirical surveys, including FTCR and Merdeka Centre data, show a marked decline in Najib's popularity, while significant portions of the population expressed openness to Tun Dr Mahathir returning as Prime Minister. Economic dissatisfaction and frustration with the political situation further reinforced public demand for a change in leadership. Overall, the public perceived Najib as incapable of restoring national welfare, justifying his removal in the GE14

Table 1: Issues on public rejection of Dato' Seri Najib Razak

Dimension	Description/Findings	Implication
Issue focus	Public rejection of Dato' Seri Najib Razak and criticism of his leadership.	Demonstrates widespread dissatisfaction with Najib's governance.
Opposition strategy	PH leaders emphasised negative perceptions of Najib regarding integrity, economy, cost of living, corruption, and governance failures.	Strengthened public sentiment for change; contributed to PH's electoral success.

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Table 1 (*continued*)

Dimension	Description/Findings	Implication
Major controversies	1MDB scandal and GST implementation.	Damaged Najib's credibility domestically and internationally; reinforced perception of BN as a kleptocratic government.
Theoretical context	Political decay observed by Fukuyama (2015) and Diamond (2016): democratic principles eroding in developing countries, institutions manipulated by elites.	Leadership crisis weakens representative democracy; highlights structural governance issues in Malaysia.
Empirical evidence 1	FT Confidential Research (2018): Najib's urban popularity fell from 80% (Q4 2015) to ~50% (Q1 2018); 31.1% respondents open to Mahathir returning.	Declining public confidence in Najib; readiness for leadership change.
Empirical evidence 2	Merdeka Centre survey (2010–2014): popularity dropped from 72% to below 50%.	Confirms long-term erosion of support for Najib prior to 2018 election.
Economic sentiment	Survey of 252 respondents in Malay-majority states: 51.8% dissatisfied with economy, 50.2% dissatisfied with political situation.	Economic and political dissatisfaction reinforces desire for leadership change.
Summary paradigm	Public perceived Najib as incapable of fulfilling national responsibilities.	Justified public demand for his removal in the GE14.

The People's Demand to Overthrow a Tyrannical Government

The second major issue concerns the public's desire to overthrow a perceived tyrannical government, specifically the BN administration. This sentiment culminated in the GE14 on 9 May 2018, when the electorate demonstrated that their collective power outweighed that of leaders deemed oppressive and arrogant. ZF Zamir (2018) noted that the BN Cabinet had, for five years, responded to public concerns with absurd or inadequate answers, reinforcing the perception of an inept and unaccountable government.

Significantly, GE14 marked a pivotal shift as Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, who had previously governed for 22 years, joined the opposition by founding the PPBM and aligning with the PH coalition. Previously criticised by the opposition with labels such as "mahafiraun" and

"mahazalim", Tun Mahathir now led the opposition against what was perceived as a tyrannical government, symbolising the struggle of "tyranny vs former tyranny".

Contrasting perspectives were expressed by Rosnah (2012), former Chief of Puteri UMNO, who argued that accusations portraying BN as tyrannical were merely opposition propaganda intended to mislead the public. She highlighted that the government had implemented numerous welfare programmes to improve citizens' well-being, including Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M), Klinik 1Malaysia (K1M), Kedai Rakyat 1Malaysia (KR1M), Kebajikan Rakyat 1Malaysia (KAR1SMA), Menu Rakyat 1Malaysia dan Perumahan Rakyat 1Malaysia (PR1MA), aiming to alleviate the rising cost of living.

Despite these differing opinions, the public's action in GE14 confirms that the paradigm of rejecting a tyrannical government had materialised. The election demonstrated the electorate's ability to exercise political power to ensure accountability and influence the nation's leadership for a brighter future.

Based on Table 2, the second issue highlights the Malaysian public's determination to overthrow a government perceived as tyrannical, specifically the BN administration. Public dissatisfaction stemmed from perceptions of arrogance, unaccountability, and ineffectiveness, despite the government's welfare initiatives to alleviate economic burdens (Siti Nurzahira et al. 2019). Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's return to opposition leadership strengthened PH's credibility and mobilised voter support. Ultimately, the GE14 demonstrated the electorate's power to reject oppressive governance, illustrating the realisation of a paradigm in which citizens actively demand accountability and political change (Rosdi and Ithnan 2019).

Table 2: Issues on the people's demand to overthrow a tyrannical government

Dimension	Description/Findings	Implication
Issue focus	Public desire to overthrow a perceived tyrannical government, specifically the BN administration.	Demonstrates strong popular demand for political change and rejection of oppressive governance.
Public perception	BN government perceived as arrogant, unaccountable, and ineffective, especially in responding to public concerns (Zamir 2018).	Undermines legitimacy of BN leadership; strengthens call for electoral change.
Opposition strategy	Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, formerly criticised as "mahafiraun" and "mahazalim", joined opposition, leading PPBM within PH to challenge BN.	Reinforces credibility of opposition and mobilises voters against the incumbent government.

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Table 2 (*continued*)

Dimension	Description/Findings	Implication
Government response	BN argued accusations of tyranny were opposition propaganda (Rosnah 2012). Government cited welfare initiatives: BR1M, K1M, KR1M, KARISMA, Menu Rakyat 1Malaysia, PRIMA.	Welfare measures intended to counteract criticisms, but insufficient to prevent electoral defeat.
Outcome	GE14 results demonstrated public power in rejecting perceived tyranny.	Confirms the paradigm of citizens demanding the removal of oppressive leadership; validates democratic accountability.

Public Demand for Better Welfare

The third key issue is the public's desire for improved welfare, a significant factor in the transition of power from BN to PH. While the BN government under Dato' Seri Najib Razak implemented initiatives to safeguard citizen welfare, such as K1M, BR1M, KR1M and other programmes aimed at alleviating the public's burden, many Malaysians sought further enhancements in social support.

A critical driver of public support for PH was the party's election manifesto, which promised 10 key initiatives within the first 100 days of government. These included the abolition of the GST and Employees Provident Fund (EPF) contributions for spouses, cancellation of Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional (PTPTN) student loans, reductions in fuel prices, and other welfare-focused measures. The youth demographic, particularly those aged 21–30 who were major beneficiaries of student loans, were especially influenced by these promises, contributing significantly to PH's electoral success in GE14.

However, these promises faced practical limitations after the election. The Ministry of Education emphasised that all PTPTN borrowers, regardless of the manifesto pledges, had to repay their loans in accordance with moral and Islamic obligations (Maszlee 2018; Siti Nurzahira et al. 2019). Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who was Prime Minister at the time, also expressed concern about the irresponsibility of some borrowers, which contributed to arrears totalling approximately RM36 billion. The PH manifesto had proposed deferring repayments for graduates earning RM4,000 or less per month, yet implementation faced significant challenges.

Table 3 shows that the third issue emphasises the public's demand for improved welfare, which played a pivotal role in supporting PH during GE14. While the previous BN administration implemented initiatives to safeguard citizen welfare, many Malaysians sought greater social support. PH's manifesto promises, such as abolishing GST and deferring PTPTN loans, particularly appealed to young voters and contributed to its electoral success. However, practical challenges, including the obligation to repay PTPTN loans and national debt constraints, hindered the full implementation of these promises. Consequently, the issue reflects the tension between voters' welfare expectations and the government's capacity to fulfil its commitments, highlighting the importance of accountability and realistic policy planning.

Table 3: Issues on public demand for better welfare

Dimension	Description/Findings	Implication
Issue focus	Public demand for improved welfare and social support.	Highlights the electorate's concern for better living conditions and government accountability.
Government initiatives (BN)	Programmes such as K1M, BR1M, KR1M and other welfare measures.	Demonstrates that previous government attempted to address welfare, but perceived as insufficient by public.
PH election promises	Abolish GST, EPF contributions for spouses, cancel PTPTN loans, reduce fuel prices, and other 100-day initiatives.	Attracted significant youth support, especially students and young borrowers.
Challenges in implementation	Ministry of Education and Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad emphasised that PTPTN loans must be repaid; arrears amounted to RM36 billion.	Reveals tension between electoral promises and practical governance; limits the fulfilment of welfare pledges.
Outcome/public perception	Initial enthusiasm from voters due to welfare promises; scepticism arises as promises remain partially unfulfilled.	Raises questions about PH's capability to sustain the welfare paradigm; highlights accountability in governance.

In conclusion, the public's demand for better welfare remains a central paradigm shaping political expectations. The key question remains: how can the PH government fulfil its welfare promises, especially when it uses pre-existing national debt to justify delayed or unfulfilled commitments? This issue underscores the tension between electoral promises and the practical constraints of governance.

The Public's Desire for Tun Mahathir's Return to Leadership

The fourth issue reflects Malaysians' widespread aspiration to see Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad return as Prime Minister to restore stability and governance in the country. Tun Mahathir, a seasoned statesman and iconic figure, commands respect not only within Malaysia but internationally for his leadership legacy. Consequently, PH leaders selected him as their candidate for the seventh Prime Ministership following GE14. On Thursday, 10 May 2018, Tun Mahathir was officially appointed as Malaysia's seventh Prime Minister, marking his return to political leadership after a 15-year hiatus.

Tun Mahathir's appointment was widely perceived as a symbolic restoration of national pride, with citizens viewing him as a saviour and hero. Born on 10 July 1925 in Lorong Kilang Ais Seberang Perak, Alor Setar, Kedah, Mahathir entered politics at 20, joining campaigns against the Malayan Union after the Japanese occupation ended in 1945. He became a founding member of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1946 and initially served as Kedah State Chairman and Chairman of the Political Committee. In the 1964 general election, he won the Kota Setar parliamentary seat with a 60.2% majority, defeating the candidate from Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). Tun Mahathir assumed office as Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister on 16 July 1981 at the age of 56, serving for 22 years until 2003.

Among his notable actions during his first tenure was the release of 21 detainees under the Internal Security Act, including journalist Samad Ismail and former deputy minister Abdullah Ahmad, suspected of being underground communists. Yet, Mahathir's return under the PH coalition, after leaving office in 2003, remains one of the most significant political developments in contemporary Malaysian history, reinforcing the notion of leadership "for the people, by the people" (Azyyati 2018).

Political analyst Khoo Boo Teik (2018) observed that since relinquishing power 14 years prior, Mahathir had monitored Malaysia's political landscape and re-entered the scene to rectify perceived shortcomings from his previous tenure. According to Sivamurugan, the public continues to expect the implementation of PH's 100-day manifesto promises, including abolishing the GST, alleviating financial burdens, deferring repayment of PTPTN loans, and investigating various corruption scandals.

During the second tenure phase of Mahathir's leadership, the priority shifted towards human capital development rather than solely physical infrastructure, as emphasised in the first phase. The government established an advisory council to provide strategic economic guidance, stabilise the domestic economy, and instil confidence in foreign investors. Once economic stability

is achieved, physical infrastructure development is expected to resume, further enhancing investor confidence. Moreover, despite the newness of Mahathir's ministerial team, many members, such as Lim Guan Eng and Mohamed Azmin Ali, brought over a decade of state governance experience, providing additional administrative competence.

Table 4 shows that the fourth issue reflects the Malaysian public's strong desire for Tun Mahathir to resume the role of Prime Minister, perceiving him as a stabilising figure capable of guiding the nation after years of political dissatisfaction. His appointment on 10 May 2018 under the PH coalition symbolised both public trust and strategic electoral calculation. Mahathir's long tenure from 1981 to 2003, coupled with his political experience and international recognition, reinforced his legitimacy as a statesman. Analysts emphasise that his leadership in the second phase prioritised human capital development and economic stabilisation, while laying the groundwork for infrastructure growth. Nonetheless, challenges remain due to his advanced age and the planned transition of power to Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, highlighting issues of succession and sustainable governance.

Table 4: The public's desire for Tun Mahathir's return to leadership

Dimension	Description/Findings	Implication
Issue focus	Public aspiration for Tun Mahathir's return as Prime Minister.	Highlights the symbolic and practical role of a veteran leader in restoring national confidence and political stability.
Political context	Tun Mahathir was appointed as 7th Prime Minister on 10 May 2018 under PH, 15 years after leaving office.	Demonstrates the public's trust in experienced leadership and the electoral strategy of PH leveraging Mahathir's legacy.
Historical background	Mahathir's prior tenure (1981–2003) included political activism, state governance, and significant policy reforms.	Establishes credibility and legitimacy as a statesman capable of guiding the country in challenging times.
Public perception	Viewed as a saviour and hero, admired nationally and internationally.	Reflects symbolic leadership and emotional attachment influencing voting behaviour.

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Table 4 (*continued*)

Dimension	Description/Findings	Implication
Analyst commentary	The return aims to correct prior shortcomings, focusing on human capital development, economic stabilisation, and eventual infrastructure growth.	Suggests leadership decisions are guided by strategic priorities for sustainable national development.
Challenges/ future considerations	Advanced age of Mahathir and agreed transition to Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim as 8th Prime Minister.	Raises concerns about continuity, succession planning, and effective governance in long-term political stability.

In conclusion, while the public's aspiration for Tun Mahathir to resume the Prime Ministership was fulfilled, questions remain regarding his capacity to sustain the role given his advanced age, and the eventual transfer of leadership to Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim as the eighth Prime Minister, as agreed within the PH coalition. These considerations highlight the intersection of public expectation, political symbolism, and practical governance challenges in contemporary Malaysian politics.

THE LEADERSHIP PARADIGM OF PAKATAN HARAPAN IN THE NEW MALAYSIA

The four issues previously discussed collectively shape the public's perception of the PH government, which in turn constitutes the leadership paradigm of the "New Malaysia". Analysis of these issues shows that citizens' support for PH rests on three central paradigms: openness, equity, and unity.

Openness reflects the public expectation of transparent governance, accountable decision-making, and a participatory approach that includes citizens' voices in policy formulation. Equity signifies the demand for fair distribution of resources, social welfare, and opportunities, ensuring that all segments of society benefit from government policies. Unity embodies the aspiration for national cohesion, transcending ethnic, religious, and political divisions, while fostering collective responsibility for the nation's progress.

These three core paradigms provide a conceptual framework to understand the rationale behind public support for PH and the guiding principles that shape the governance style of the New Malaysia. They also serve as analytical lenses for assessing the effectiveness and sustainability of the government's policies in meeting citizens' expectations.

Paradigm 1: Openness

The paradigm of openness is reflected in the media's freedom to report news and in broader rights to freedom of speech and association, which are essential to a conducive democratic environment (Miller 1978). In fact, among the 10 core elements of a democratic system, media freedom is recognised as a critical component (Roskin 2011). However, it is challenging to identify any nation that fully guarantees these rights in absolute terms.

This observation implies that no existing model of democracy fully embodies these characteristics, even in Western countries often celebrated for freedom of speech and human rights, such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. In the Malaysian context, media has historically leaned towards an authoritarian model, defined by two key factors: first, media must align with government interests and electromagnetic spectrum usage is state-owned; second, authoritarian governments monopolise mass media systems entirely (Roskin 2011).

Media plays a crucial role in shaping national direction by acting as a bridge between the government and citizens. It enables the dissemination of government policies, such as the National Transformation Program, allowing the public to understand and engage with state development initiatives. Concurrently, citizens can provide feedback and express opinions, creating a two-way flow of information. To achieve this exchange transparently, media freedom is essential; without it, communication objectives cannot be fully realised (Yahya 2017).

In line with this, the PH government has taken significant steps to enhance freedom of expression in the media. The widespread use of social media further amplifies this openness, enabling both media and citizens to leverage government transparency. Compared with previous restrictions under the Anti-Fake News Act 2018, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad clarified on 16 May 2018 that the government had no intention of maintaining the Act but would review national security laws that could restrict free expression.

The government affirmed its commitment to media freedom, albeit with limitations. Reports that are inaccurate but do not threaten public order will not be censored. However, deliberate attempts to incite chaos or tension will be met with appropriate legal action. Minister of Communications and Multimedia, Gobind Singh Deo, also announced the repeal of the Anti-Fake News Act within the first 100 days, as pledged in the PH manifesto. Additionally, laws under the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) will be re-evaluated, particularly those governing complaints and investigations of media reports.

The Prime Minister proposed clearer definitions of "fake news" to ensure the public and publishers understand its scope. This highlights the delicate balance between enabling media to inform and protecting public order. Islam-based principles should guide ethical media practices and responsible information consumption to maintain social harmony.

Currently, media practitioners increasingly emphasise the right to report freely, and PH has embraced freedom of expression as a key principle. Freedom of expression, as recognised internationally and constitutionally under Article 10(1)(a) of the Federal Constitution, remains fundamental; however, it is not absolute. Article 10(2) allows Parliament to impose restrictions to safeguard national security, public order, international relations, or moral principles (Malaysia Government 2010).

In conclusion, the openness paradigm emphasises media freedom, freedom of speech, and public participation in the democratic system. Analysis shows that after the GE14, the PH government actively enhanced openness by repealing the Anti-Fake News Act 2018, reducing media restrictions, and promoting social media as a platform for information exchange. Statistically, social media users in Malaysia grew to 82% in 2018 compared to 75% in 2015 (Nain 2018). Indicating a high potential for interactive communication between the government and citizens. However, critical analysis reveals that openness is conditional; the government stresses that media freedom must align with national security and moral principles, indicating that media democracy in Malaysia still operates within legal oversight (Yahya 2017).

Paradigm 2: Equality

The second paradigm underpinning PH's governance in the New Malaysia is equality, encompassing social justice across economic, educational, social, gender and human rights domains. Equality, in the Islamic context, refers to fairness and the proper allocation of rights and responsibilities, ensuring that benefits and burdens are distributed equitably across society (Ibn 'Ashur, as cited in Muhammad Zarifi and Taqwa Zabidi 2009). Social justice therefore emphasises the equal treatment of all individuals, regardless of religion, ethnicity, language, or social status, reflecting the Islamic principle of universal fairness.

In the post-GE14 era, demands for equitable governance have emerged from multiple stakeholders, including politicians, academics, media practitioners, NGOs and human rights activists. The PH government responded with concrete initiatives to address long-standing inequities. A key example involves petroleum

royalties, where oil-producing states such as Terengganu, Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak were guaranteed a 20% share of petroleum revenues. This policy aimed to correct historical inequities, particularly for states previously marginalised under prior administrations.

Beyond resource allocation, equality in governance also extended to economic and infrastructural parity between East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) and Peninsular Malaysia. Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad affirmed that these states would receive equal treatment in minimum wages and development initiatives, ensuring no region is regarded as secondary. This approach signals a commitment to federalism that respects the rights and needs of all states proportionally.

Similarly, equality was applied to parliamentary funding, where allocations were distributed fairly among Members of Parliament (MPs) regardless of party affiliation, in contrast to previous partisan practices under BN (*Astro Awani* 2018). The government allocated RM500,000 for ruling MPs, RM100,000 for opposition MPs, and RM200,000 for constituency service centres, demonstrating an equitable distribution model.

The paradigm also extends to human rights considerations, including debates surrounding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) communities. While the government recognises their citizenship rights and the prohibition of discrimination in workplaces, the affirmation of practices contrary to national laws and Islamic principles remains constrained (*Malaysiakini* 2018a). The official stance balances equality and legal-cultural frameworks, reflecting Malaysia's multiethnic, multireligious society with Islam as the constitutional religion.

In conclusion, the equality paradigm in PH governance underscores equitable distribution of rights, resources, and opportunities. However, its implementation must align with constitutional law, societal norms, and Malaysia's cultural-religious context to ensure justice without undermining national cohesion. The equality paradigm focuses on social justice, ensuring fair distribution of rights, responsibilities, and benefits among citizens in terms of economy, education, and infrastructure development. Analysis indicates that PH attempted to reduce developmental gaps between Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, while allocating equitable funds for both ruling and opposition MPs (*Astro Awani* 2018). Statistically, the government granted 20% oil royalties to all oil-producing states and equalised minimum wage levels across Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak, demonstrating effective steps towards equality. Nonetheless, educational issues, such as UEC recognition, sparked controversy as they challenge national education standards, reflecting tensions between equality principles and meritocratic criteria (*Utusan Online* 2018).

Paradigm 3: National Unity

The third paradigm underpinning PH's governance is national unity, conceptualised as the strategic integration of diverse social, cultural, political, and economic groups into a cohesive Malaysian identity. National unity entails the harmonisation of previously fragmented societal elements, fostering a sense of collective belonging while balancing regional, ethnic, and religious interests (Weiner 1965; Bahar and Tangdililing 1996). It encompasses six dimensions: territorial, social, economic, educational, cultural and political integration.

Economically, the PH administration has pursued equitable development through policies such as allocating 20% of petroleum royalties to all oil-producing states, including Kelantan and Terengganu, historically marginalised under prior regimes. This initiative also aims to reduce urban-rural disparities and ensure parity across Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). Politically, PH has reinstated federalist principles, promoting cooperation between federal and state governments regardless of party affiliation, thereby mitigating partisan discrimination in resource allocation and development planning.

From an educational perspective, national unity intersects with debates over the recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC). Critics argue that full recognition could compromise academic standards in public universities and the civil service due to linguistic and historical knowledge gaps relative to the national curriculum (Lam et al. 2022). These concerns highlight the need for a professional, non-partisan approach to educational policy that ensures inclusion without undermining national cohesion or meritocratic standards. Socioculturally, PH governance emphasises inclusivity while respecting Malaysia's multireligious, multiethnic framework, ensuring policies reinforce unity without eroding Islam's constitutional status as the state religion.

In sum, the national unity paradigm under PH governance reflects a multidimensional strategy to consolidate Malaysia's diverse society into a singular national identity while maintaining constitutional safeguards, equitable development, and meritocratic standards. This paradigm positions Malaysia as a model of pluralistic integration in the region, reinforcing cohesion, stability, and collective national identity.

The unity paradigm aims to integrate Malaysia's diverse ethnic, social, and regional elements into a cohesive national identity. Analysis shows that PH's measures to ensure balanced economic and infrastructural development, as well as the restoration of federalism between the central government and opposition-led states, help reduce sociopolitical tensions. Economically, projects in Sabah and Sarawak increased by 15% in 2018 compared to 2017

(Ministry of Finance Malaysia 2017), reflecting progress in regional integration. In education, the UEC issue highlighted challenges in maintaining both social cohesion and educational quality.

Table 5 illustrates how the three paradigms of openness, equality, and unity reflect the PH government's efforts to foster a more democratic, inclusive, and cohesive New Malaysia. Openness strengthens information exchange and political participation, equality ensures fair allocation of rights and benefits, and unity builds a shared national identity while bridging regional and social gaps. Each paradigm faces challenges: openness is constrained by legal frameworks, equality must balance merit and justice, and unity requires continuous adaptation to Malaysia's demographic and cultural diversity. Collectively, these paradigms provide a strategic foundation for an inclusive, competitive, and harmonious New Malaysia.

Table 5: Three paradigms of the PH leadership paradigm in the New Malaysia

Paradigm	Definition / Focus	Key Features / Implementation	Impact / Outcome
Openness	Freedom of speech, freedom of the media, and transparency in governance (Miller 1978; Roskin 2011).	Abolition of the Anti-Fake News Act 2018 Promotion of social media engagement- Clear legal boundaries for media operations- Transparency in government policy communication.	Promotes an informed citizenry, facilitates dialogue between government and public, reduces media suppression, and enhances democratic processes (Yahya 2017).
Equality/ Social Justice	Fair distribution of rights, responsibilities, and benefits among citizens without discrimination (Ibn 'Ashur n.d.; Muhammad and Taqwa 2009).	Royalty payments to all oil producing states, including opposition led states. Equal development projects. across federal and state levels. Standardised minimum wages and parliamentary allocations. Respect for human rights while considering socio. cultural context.	Reduces socio-economic disparities, ensures inclusive development, promotes equity across regions and communities, and strengthens social cohesion.

(*continued on next page*)

Table 5 (*continued*)

Paradigm	Definition / Focus	Key Features / Implementation	Impact / Outcome
Unity / National Integration	Integration of diverse social, cultural, political, and economic groups into a cohesive national identity (Weiner 1965; Bahar and Tangdililing 1996).	Equitable federalism across all states. Balanced infrastructure development. Education policies maintaining national cohesion. Preservation of Islam as the federal religion while respecting multi. ethnic and multi religious rights.	Fosters national cohesion, reduces ethnic and regional tensions, strengthens collective Malaysian identity, and enhances stability and governance legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

The GE14 in Malaysia marks a watershed moment in the nation's political evolution, attracting considerable scholarly interest due to its deviation from historically ethnoreligiously driven voting patterns. Predominantly influenced by post-independence Generations X and Y, the election outcome reflects paradigms shaped by socioeconomic conditions and educational foundations, signalling a shift towards a politics that prioritises nationalism, social justice, human rights, gender and youth participation, and economic equity across societal classes. This transition embodies the "new politics" conceptualised during the reformation period of 1998–1999 and progressively consolidated through successive electoral cycles, culminating in the establishment of the PH government. Central to this emergent governance model are the paradigms of openness, equality and national unity, which collectively redefine the relationship between the state and citizens by fostering transparency, inclusive development, and integrative national cohesion. However, the five-year term presents both an opportunity and a challenge, as failure to operationalise these paradigms substantively could erode public trust and undermine the legitimacy of the New Malaysia agenda. Hence, the effective institutionalisation and consistent implementation of these paradigms remain pivotal for translating electoral promises into durable, equitable, and cohesive governance outcomes.

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) through the Research Leadership Acceleration Programme for ISDEV Research Visibility and Innovation Ecosystem (Account No.: B0229298; Sub-Account No.: R501-UR-REF702-2600000271-0000; Project No.: 2600000271). The authors also extend their sincere appreciation to the

Centre for Islamic Development Management Studies (ISDEV), Universiti Sains Malaysia, for its institutional support and encouragement throughout this research.

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