

23

Responding to Perceptions of Electoral Fraud: Followership, Emotions, and Collective Action from Malaysia's 13th General Election

Eugene Y. J. Tee, Douglas S. E. Teoh
and TamilSelvan Ramis

Malaysia's 13th General Elections (GE13) is remembered among citizens as an event rife with controversies and allegations of electoral fraud. Central to public opinion and among voters was the belief that the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (National Front), resorted to fraudulent practices to garner an electoral victory. Although the opposing coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance¹), obtained the majority in terms of votes,

¹The National Front adopts a conservative ideological orientation, while the People's Alliance party's views are more reflective of social liberalism and social democracy. The National Front is comprised of three major parties, each representing a major ethnic group in Malaysia – UMNO (United Malays National Organization) for the Malays, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) representing the Chinese, and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), which represents the Indians. The majority of seats in the National Front, however, are held by Malays.

it failed to form the majority government. The National Front secured 47.38% of all votes (5,237,699 votes) – its worst performance in the general election since its formation in 1973, while the People’s Alliance managed to secure 50.87% of votes (5,623,984 votes). Political analysts state that the outcome was inevitable, due to widespread gerrymandering of constituencies by the National Front, which resulted in votes from certain constituencies being worth comparatively more than others (Chin, 2013; Ostwald, 2013).

In addition to allegations of gerrymandering, there were also accusations of dishonest and corrupt practices marring the fairness of GE13. Members of the public accused the National Front of manipulating both voters and the electoral policies to ensure that the results would turn out in their favor. Members of the public also raised concerns regarding the capacity of the Election Commission to ensure free and fair elections, and throughout the entire event observed that the National Front were flouting or manipulating electoral policies in order to retain majority governance. Members of the general public took it upon themselves to counter the National Front’s fraudulent practices by forming informal coalitions during the lead-up to, during, and after the elections. Following the election, one notable mass movement that took place was the “505 Blackout Rallies,” held to protest and reject the election results.

The Lead-Up to GE13 and Formation of Informal Coalitions

A few days prior to GE13, reports surfaced that the National Front was planning to allow migrant workers to vote. These migrant workers consisted of individuals who were not Malaysian citizens but resided in the country for employment purposes, usually on a work visa. News of such allegations spread quickly over social media. These migrant workers were allegedly provided Malaysian identification cards that would legally enable them to cast their vote for the National Front, and their votes would be recognized as those of legitimate voters. There were also allegations that the National Front used phantom voters. One report was of a supposedly “empty” local aircraft, MH8611, seen carrying Nepalese nationals arriving at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. These individuals were also seen being ushered into vans bearing logos of the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (Ding et al., 2013). Such incidents were video-recorded and uploaded onto social media sharing sites; this contributed to the general public’s suspicions that the National Front

was taking measures to ensure an electoral outcome that favored their political interests.

The circulation of such reports via social media had an unprecedented effect; members of the public began forming informal coalitions and making preparations to counter the possibility of illegal voters influencing the upcoming general elections (Augustin, 2013). Primary opposition came from an informal coalition called “Asalkan Bukan UMNO” (Anything but United Malays National Organization [UMNO]). This informal coalition was acting in direct opposition to the UMNO, the largest and most influential founding party of the National Front which champions Malay supremacy (Ketuanan Melayu) and conservative Islamic values. Initially formed in 2011, the Anything but UMNO coalition took steps to ensure that polling and counting agents were assigned in every polling center and also used social media to encourage fellow citizens to curb the entry of migrant workers into polling centers. Representatives from this informal coalition were asked to stop and question anyone suspected of being a migrant worker entering the premises to vote. Anyone stopped was asked about his or her place of birth and schooling, ability to converse in the national language (Bahasa Malaysia), and tested on the ability to sing the Malaysian national anthem and/or recite the National Principles. Should they fail to provide sufficient “proof” of their citizenship, they were unofficially detained in the form of a citizen’s arrest. Many such arrests were documented and shared through Malaysian social media (Augustin, 2013).

Online reports were also abuzz with at least two alleged forms of cheating by the National Front in various constituencies. The first form included reports of blackouts and power failures at some counting stations during the vote counting. There were allegations that additional ballot boxes were brought in during these blackouts amidst the panic and confusion, resulting in some dramatic reversals in the electoral count. The second were reports of vehicles attempting to enter polling centers to deliver additional ballot boxes. These vehicles were suspected of bringing in additional votes from other constituencies. In the Lembah Pantai constituency, for example, voters formed a human barricade, linking arms to prevent a vehicle suspected of carrying additional ballot boxes to the polling center (Vinod, 2013a, 2013b). In another constituency, members of the public filmed what appeared to be a helicopter dropping bags of completed ballot forms onto a field, awaiting pickup from vans. There were also accusations that the Electoral Commission authorities were allowing voting to be done in advance for certain constituencies, were bribing voters, and were deliberately falsifying vote counting forms. These allegations further created the perception that the Electoral Commission was not fully independent or impartial from the National Front.

Electoral Results and Post-GE13 Sentiment

Despite the efforts of these informal coalitions, the National Front won 133 seats out of 222 in the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives), successfully forming the government. Public reaction to this outcome was mostly negative, with dissatisfaction and disappointment at the result being voiced online. Many changed their social media profile pictures to a pure black display upon hearing the results. The People's Alliance subsequently organized a series of mass protests to reject the election results. An estimated 120,000 individuals showed up for the first protest, expressing their opposition of the election results. During this protest, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim described the incident as the "worst electoral fraud in our history." He invited Malaysians to "join hands and express [their] rejection and disgust at the unprecedented electoral fraud committed by Prime Minister and National Front Leader Najib Razak and the Electoral Commission."

Voicing the frustration and injustice felt by the Malaysian public, Anwar Ibrahim further asserted, "A fight for clean and fair election remains the single most important fight that any Malaysian should relate to." Public sentiment reflected the sustained feelings of discontent several days after these rallies. Protestors dressed in black every Saturday after GE13, symbolizing a sense of mourning over the "death of democracy" and expressing contempt over the tactics employed by the National Front to maintain political dominance in the country. Some opposition leaders opted to legally dispute the election results. The Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, for instance, went on to organize the People's Tribunal to examine allegations of the National Front's electoral fraud. From this hearing, the tribunal gave the following verdict: "The inescapable conclusion must be that GE13 fell short in every one of those seven parameters for democratic election" (BERSIH 2.0., 2014).

Scholarly Commentary

The GE13 event provides several points for discussion about the psychological processes that underlie Malaysian citizens' responses to allegations of unfair and ineffectual governance. Utilizing a follower-centric model of leadership, this case sheds some light on (a) the role of intergroup emotions in consolidating social identities and (b) how followers' emotions translate to collective action against leaders.

The events of GE13 can be analyzed and understood from a follower-centric perspective of leadership. Followership comprises the important roles and behaviors that followers play in the leadership process (Collinson, 2006; Meindl, 1995). Indeed, the call for understanding the importance of followership to the leadership process has been reiterated by other research scholars (Bligh, Kohles, & Pillai, 2011). In the GE13 case, followers (Malaysian citizens) formed loose, informal collaborations and coalitions in response to leaders (National Front leaders and Electoral Commission authorities) perceived as ineffectual or corrupt. The GE13 case is an opportunity to examine how informal, collaborative groups of followers who are bound by shared emotion and identity can form and engage in collective action toward leaders. More broadly, the case also reflects one instance in which followers took active steps to engage in behaviors and actions intended to directly influence leadership outcomes.

To understand the psychological processes involved in the event, we base our analysis on Tee, Paulsen, and Ashkanasy's (2013) model of followership, comprising both the emotion and social identity processes which give rise to the events described in the case. Tee and colleagues (2013) propose that shared identity and emotion can motivate follower action toward their leaders. The authors suggest that follower actions against leaders can be prompted by at least one of three key perceptions – leader self-serving behavior, perceptions of procedural unfairness, and/or expressions of inappropriate emotions. These emotions, felt by the Malaysian public, form the basis for group-level emotion and may, in turn, translate to collective action toward leaders. The extent to which these individual and group-level emotions translate to collective emotion is influenced by the degree of individual and group identification with their social identities.

From the case, followers appear to have been motivated by the second reason, that is, perceptions of the unfair and manipulative practices of the National Front and the Electoral Commission. These perceptions prompted the formation of informal coalitions to instigate direct action and take countermeasures to ensure that the election process was fair. These perceptions were essentially of procedural unfairness concerning the processes by which a decision was reached, as opposed to perceived unfairness as a result of a decision-making outcome (De Cremer, van Dijke, & Mayer, 2010; Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2010). During the lead-up to GE13, sentiments of suspicion and mistrust were evident among the public, and it was these shared emotions that first motivated members of the public to take precautionary steps toward ensuring that the elections would be conducted as fairly as possible. Reports shared via social media fueled such suspicions, with allegations of possible fraud in the forthcoming elections fueling the formation of these

informal coalitions before the election event itself. While allegations were felt by prospective voters, social media channels facilitated the creation of group-level emotions more rapidly. Whether the allegations were accurate, or merely exaggerated and unfounded claims made by individual eyewitness reports, mattered little to the Malaysian public. They were sufficient to trigger unpleasant, reactionary emotions that were essential in the formation of informal coalitions in the days leading up to the election.

The formation of these informal coalitions was also instigated by Malaysians' sense of identification with their country rather than its formal leaders. This is evident from actions taken to prevent migrant workers from casting their votes at polling stations. At this level, Malaysians' social identity was based more heavily on their nationality than by race, ethnicity, or other demographic factors. The negative sentiment sown by allegations of corrupt electoral practices contributed toward the formation of distinct social identities, one that distinguishes Malaysian nationals from non-Malaysian nationals. The emotions felt and expressed toward non-Malaysian nationals (most of whom were migrant workers) can also be understood via Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET) (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000). According to IET, the salience of social identities promotes group-level appraisals and emotions toward out-groups. Group-level appraisals toward out-groups may then motivate action toward out-groups; feelings of anger motivate such actions. Such processes may, in part, explain why Malaysians, who felt like they were part of the in-group, took assertive, forceful action toward out-group members and made citizens' arrests of migrant workers entering the polling centers.

This shared sense of identity was also reflected in Malaysians' actions toward both the National Front and Electoral Commission. Perceiving the National Front and Electoral Commission, as well as any individuals who supported these parties, as members of the out-group also explains the collective action taken against them after the elections. The rallies held after the election and collective show of force were effective expressions of a shared identity, bound by the collective emotions felt toward these out-group individuals and parties. The organization of the People's Tribunal by the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections reflects how the shared identity of "the people" united them in a collective expression of dissatisfaction and intention to challenge the election results. The shared identity and emotions were also reflected in shared expressions – wearing black in protest of the election result and utilizing the same profile picture in protest of the election results.

While effective in garnering the popular vote for the People's Alliance, the informal coalitions did not appear to sustain itself beyond the GE13 event itself. Public responses were evident a few days after

the election, but continuing actions against the unfair electoral policies and challenges to the election results were sustained by members of the opposing parties. While many Malaysians recall the emotions felt during the GE13 event, most retain their sentiments of unfairness without necessarily engaging in actions to directly challenge the National Front or Electoral Commission further. As such, it would appear that the informal coalitions formed by the public were context-specific, motivated by the shared sense of identity and emotions surrounding GE13, but were not sustained beyond the event.

The GE13 event highlights one instance in which followers took collective action to challenge leaders and influence leadership outcomes. From this case, it can be observed that a combination of both shared emotion and identity are key psychological processes that motivate actions both toward, and against, the country's current governance. Integral to the formation of a collective identity, the Malaysian public's perceptions of unfairness served to trigger these shared emotions and were subsequently used to translate those emotions to actions taken in response to these perceptions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss how electronic forms of communication may facilitate the creation and sustainment of informal coalitions in organizations. What other examples of social media prompting informal coalitions are you aware of? In what ways are those examples similar to, or different from, the case?
2. Were both shared social identity and collective emotion necessary in prompting collective action among the Malaysian public? Could informal coalitions be formed from just the sense of shared identity or from collective emotion alone?
3. Consider the statements made by opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in response to the outcomes of GE13. What are some of the roles that leaders play in managing followers' collective identity and emotions?
4. Were the actions taken by the Malaysian public in response to the allegations of electoral fraud appropriate? Why or why not?
5. Provide some analysis and explanations for why the informal coalitions were not sustained beyond the GE13 event.

(continued)

6. Research on followership is scarce compared with studies that focus on the role of leaders in the leadership process. Provide some suggestions for how research in this domain can be advanced.
7. This case highlights collective followership action. How is that the same, or different, from individual action such as whistle-blowing?

References

- Augustin, S. (2013, May 11). *ABU defends action to stop foreigners from voting*. Retrieved from <http://www.fz.com/content/abu-defends-action-stop-foreigners-voting>
- BERSIH 2.0. (2014, April 8). *The people's tribunal on Malaysia's 13th general elections: Summary of the report*. Retrieved from <https://www.globalbersih.org/2014/04/08/the-peoples-tribunal-on-malysias-13th-general-elections-summary-of-the-report/>
- Bligh, M. C., Kohles, J. C., & Pillai, R. (2011). Romancing leadership: Past, present, and future. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(6), 1058–1077. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.09.003
- Chin, J. (2013). So close and yet so far: Strategies in the 13th Malaysian elections. *Round Table*, 102(6), 533. doi:10.1080/00358533.2013.857145
- Collinson, D. (2006). Rethinking followership: A post-structuralist analysis of follower identities. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(2), 179–189. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.12.005
- De Cremer, D., van Dijke, M., & Mayer, D. M. (2010). Cooperating when “you” and “I” are treated fairly: The moderating role of leader prototypicality. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95(6), 1121–1133. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org>
- Ding, J., Koh, L., Surin, J. A., Dragomir, M., Thompson, M., Watts, G., ... Starks, M. (2013). *Mapping digital media: Malaysia*. London: Open Society Media Program.
- Mackie, D. M., Devos, T., & Smith, E. R. (2000). Intergroup emotions: Explaining offensive action tendencies in an intergroup context. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(4), 602–616. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org>
- Meindl, J. R. (1995). The romance of leadership as a follower-centric theory: A social constructionist approach. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(3), 329–341. doi:10.1016/1048-9843(95)90012-8
- Ostwald, K. (2013). How to win a lost election: Malapportionment and Malaysia's 2013 general election. *Round Table*, 102(6), 521. doi:10.1080/00358533.2013.857146
- Tee, E. Y. J., Paulsen, N., & Ashkanasy, N. M. (2013). Revisiting followership through a social identity perspective: The role of collective follower emotion and action. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 24(6), 902–918. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.10.002
- Van Dijke, M., & De Cremer, D. (2010). Procedural fairness and endorsement of prototypical leaders: Leader benevolence or follower control? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46(1), 85–96. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2009.10.004

Vinod, G. (2013a). Pakatan rejects GE13 results, cries fraud. *Free Malaysia Today*, May 6. Retrieved from <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2013/05/06/pakatan-rejects-ge13-results-cries-fraud/>

Vinod, G. (2013b). PKR shows new proof of electoral fraud. *Free Malaysia Today*, May 27. Retrieved from <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2013/05/27/pkr-provides-proof-of-phantom-voters-blackouts/>

(C) Emerald Group Publishing