

# Populist Leaders in Malaysia: Why Are They Popular?

SAP 2023

13 September 2023

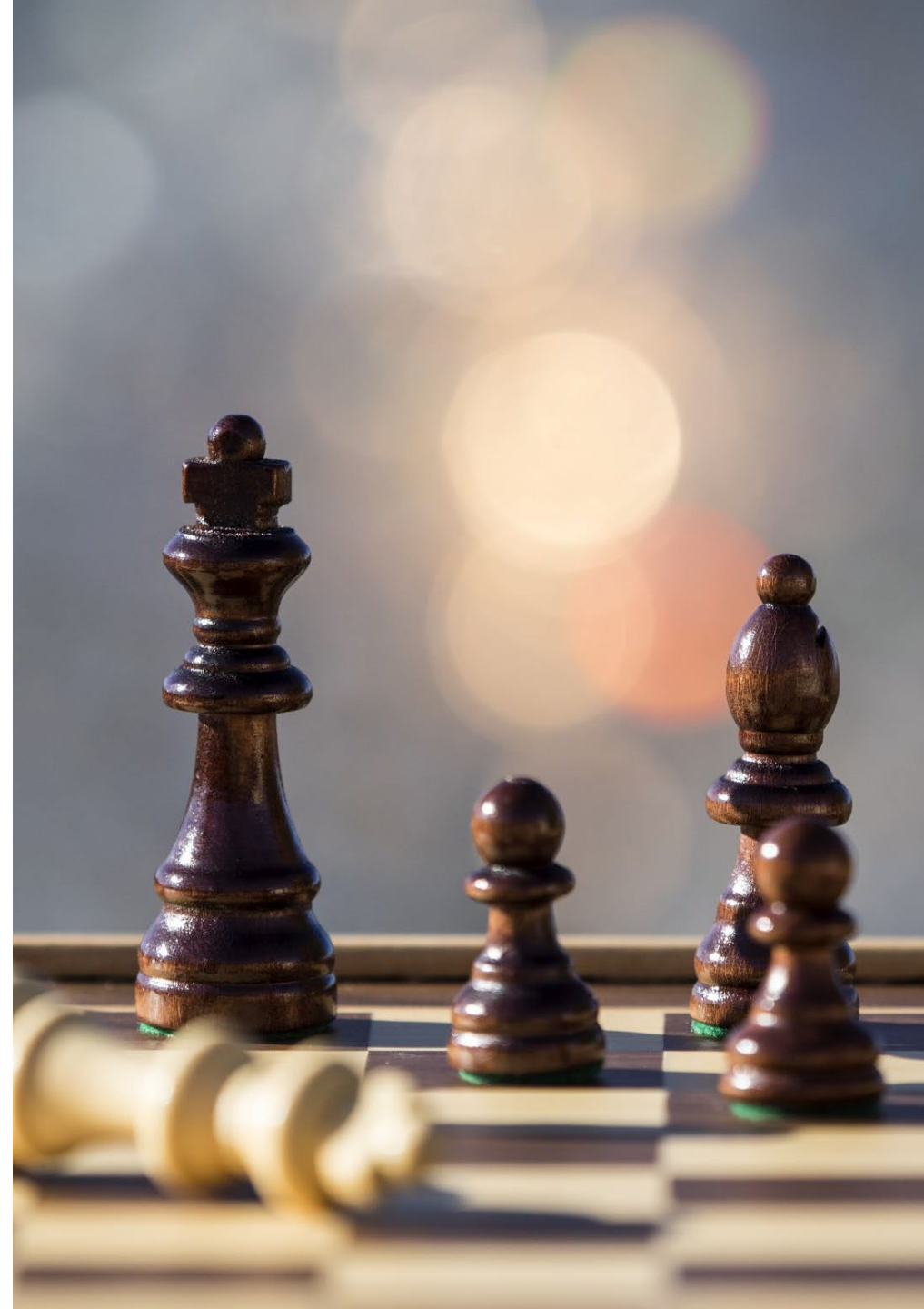


# Initial Argument

- With increased political opportunities in the 21st century, more Malay leaders are utilising a populist approach to attract votes.
  - Najib Razak implemented populist economic policies, and Anwar Ibrahim's Pakatan Harapan election manifesto in 2018 was in a similar vein. Economic populism appeals to the "common man" by advocating for economic policies intended to benefit ordinary citizens, often criticising established elites, corporations, and economic systems that are perceived as exploitative or unfair.
  - After the Barisan Nasional lost the 14th general election, Islamist populism grew. Islamist civilisational populism leverages religious sentiments within the global ummah or Muslim community, promising a return to traditional Islamic values and governance and often portraying secular or Western ideologies as adversarial.

# Inferiority?

- Populism as a strategy is effective in Malaysia because of the Malays' inferiority complex in needing a protector (Johari, 2017).
- The perceived socio-economic gap created a set of insecurities felt by the Malays. However, it's important to note that such characterisations can reinforce stereotypes and oversimplifications, and the current situation in Malaysia is a complex interplay of various ethnic, political, and economic factors.
- Malaysia and other Asian countries are unique in their cultural setting with deference for authorities. The Malays are also known to be feudalistic in which their leaders are seen as protector of the "lower class" Malays from encroachment of non-Muslim "others".





# Strategy vs Ideational

- Populism as a strategy best explains the rise of Islamist populism in Malaysia through a civilisational discourse of “us”, the Malay Muslims, against “them”, the corrupt non-Muslims and liberal elites.
- If it is solely based on the ideational approach, populism should have flourished for decades in Malaysia, given that demographically the Malays have had to contend with the more economically advanced Chinese since before independence.
- But as a recent political strategy, Islamist civilisational populism is purposely utilised in a more open political system.
- Post-2018 in civilisational populism, an in-group from one's own civilisation is contrasted with an out-group from a different civilisation (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022b).

# Mahathir Mohamad – Authoritarian Populism

---

- Mahathir was an anti-establishment populist who introduced punch-cards and nametags for state officials to reduce elitism (Shah, 2019).
- He enforced the Internal Security Act (ISA), which silenced critics and prevented judicial examination of his government's activities (Juego, 2018).
- The ISA led to the torture of feminists, environmentalists, political opponents, and communists in 1987 (Shah, 2019), similar to Rodrigo Duterte's drug war of extra-judicial killings and opposition against established institutions.
- Mahathir has moved further right on the political spectrum from UMNO's centre-right position. Mahathir claimed the Malay majority did not prosper since meritocracy favoured non-Malays because they were the most qualified, educated, and wealthy (Tee, 2023).



# Hadi Awang – Islamist Populist

---

- His political opponents are sometimes conflated with enemies of Islam in his rhetoric, as seen by his statement that "it is forbidden to be united with enemies of the faith and the ummah" (Malaysiakini, 2021a).
- In August 2022, the Chinese minority in Malaysia was to blame for massive corruption because they were the largest non-Muslim group in the country (Free Malaysia Today 2022a).
- Hadi expressed regret at what he called the dismal turnout of Muslim voters, even going so far as to say that Muslims who did not vote could be committing a grave sin (Malaysiakini, 2022).
- As a civilisational populist, Hadi's antipathy towards non-Muslims extends beyond Malaysia. For example, when Turkey was hit by earthquakes in February 2023, Hadi claimed that many European governments were preoccupied with helping Ukraine fight Russia to care and provide help to a Muslim country (Free Malaysia Today, 2023). This is, of course, untrue as many European governments were among the first to respond to the calamities.





# Najib Razak – Economic Populist

---

- Media moguls in the West, such as Donald Trump, who are wealthy themselves but rhetorically resonate with the less advantaged.
- In Malaysia, it is sometimes difficult to separate economic from civilisational populists because the Malays make up a large percentage of the poor (Zulkifli, 2023). Thus, policies to help the poor can also be seen as specifically pro-Malay. The difference, however, is in the rhetoric employed.
- To sway voters in the 2013 election, Najib's administration enacted the Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M) and other '1Malaysia' spending programmes to help the country's underprivileged Malays (Welsh, 2013; Weiss, 2020).



# Anwar Ibrahim – Soft Populist

---

- In 2018, Pakatan Harapan needed Malay votes, but it couldn't use civilisational populism because the coalition is made up of parties from different ideologies. Instead, it used economic populism based on Laclau's anti-hegemonic discursive approach against Najib and his family's extravagant spending (Malaysiakini, 2016).
- In 2021, Anwar pushed the government to allow rapid, hassle-free withdrawals from retirement savings which was an obvious populist strategy.





# Sanusi Md Nor – Classic Populist (new addition)

---

- Challenging background – dismissed from boarding school
- Down-to-earth persona - understood people's concerns and aspirations on a personal level
- The people vs. the (royal) establishment, the business establishment (Berjaya), the non-Malay establishment (DAP)
- Allegedly claimed Penang belonged by right to Malay-majority Kedah.
- Compared Penang's government to Constantinople and PN's supporters to the forces of Ottoman Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh.
- Portrayed his movement's "enemies" as envious of the "Kedahan Malay race"



# Why are they popular?

## Democracy vs. Populism: The Asian Context

- Doorenspleet (2013) discusses the political paradox in Asia where democracy coexists with suppressed democratic norms, giving rise to populism.

## Authoritarian Populism in Asia

- Particularly in Southeast Asia, the surge in populist leaders personifies "strongman" politics. Case, Slater, and Aelst (2017) detail the politics of countries like the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, where authoritarian populist leaders, such as Rodrigo Duterte, Thaksin Shinawatra, and Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, respectively, have found considerable popularity. Mahathir?

## Ethnicity, Religion, and Populism

- Populism has shown strong overtones of ethnic and religious identities. Shukri (2023) elaborates on populist leaders using religion to marginalize minorities, thereby consolidating their own power in Malaysia.

## Culture

- Malaysia and other Asian countries are unique in their cultural setting with deference for authorities. The Malays are also known to be feudalistic in which their leaders are seen as protector of the “lower class” Malays.

## Populism and Economic Stability

- Political stability and the quest for economic prosperity often preside over calls for democratic development. Weathering the economic volatility, populist leaders have capitalized on economic growth rates to justify their tenure (Weyland, 2013). The enduring appeal of China's Communist Party, for instance, can be seen as part of the same trend towards populism-as-stability (Dickson, 2016).

## Criticism of Populism in Malaysia

- Critics argue that populist leaders present a threat to democratic institutions and norms. The preference for stability under authoritarian regimes comes at too high a cost.