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A systematic literature review of Malaysia's coalition politics, 2021–2025

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Introduction: Coalition politics remains central in Malaysia but has become less stable since 2018. This review asks how coalitions shape governance and stability, what drives formation and collapse, what roles institutions play and how ethnicity, Islamisation and demographic change influence outcomes.

Methods: A systematic review using PRISMA was conducted. Searches in Scopus and Web of Science covered 2021 to 2025 and were complemented by citation tracking. Inclusion required peer-reviewed studies on Malaysia's coalition politics. Fourteen articles met the criteria. Descriptive mapping and thematic synthesis were applied.

Results: Six themes were identified. Malaysia's party system has shifted from dominant-party rule under permanent pre-electoral coalitions, distinct from Lijphart's grand coalition model, to fragmented competition with frequent hung outcomes. Ethnicity remains the strongest predictor of voting behaviour, while regionalism increases the bargaining influence of East Malaysian parties. Islamisation has gained renewed salience, with PAS and PN benefiting from digital campaigning. The federal monarchy now plays a regular mediating role during post-electoral deadlock. Opposition coordination and alliance design affect vote conversion and post-election durability. Governing capacity is constrained by coalition heterogeneity, fiscal limits and sociocultural contention. Coverage is thinner on federal arrangements, electoral rule effects, youth cohorts under Undi18 and automatic voter registration and micro-level coalition management.

Discussion and conclusion: Malaysia's political order appears post-permanent-coalition rather than consociational. Coalitions are necessary yet fragile, increasingly formed and sustained through post-electoral bargaining and institutional mediation. Future research should test the effects of pre-electoral pacts and seat-sharing, measure the monarch's influence using transparent timelines and public statements, build state-level panels on transfers and concessions, quantify Islamisation and digital campaign effects and identify Undi18 cohort impacts using panel data.

KEYWORDS

Barisan Nasional, coalition politics, Consociationalism, Malaysia, Pakatan Harapan, Perikatan Nasional, power-sharing

1 Introduction

Coalition politics has long been central to Malaysia's political system. Classic scholars such as Lijphart (1977) argued that divided societies could achieve stability through consociational arrangements based on elite cooperation, proportionality and mutual veto. Horowitz (1985), however, questioned the long-term effectiveness of such arrangements, suggesting that ethnic incentives often make elite bargains fragile. In the Malaysian case, BN's dominance from 1957 to 2018 was often described as consociational, but subsequent scholarship has shown that this characterisation overstated the extent of institutionalised power sharing and in practice it was sustained more by UMNO's control and patronage than by genuine power-sharing (Yusoff, 1992). Horowitz (2014) later explicitly rejected the classification of Malaysia as consociational, noting the absence of grand coalitions, minority vetoes and proportional allocation mechanisms. Similarly, Wong (2023) argues that Malaysia's Alliance and later Barisan Nasional functioned as permanent pre-electoral coalitions under first-past-the-post rules, rather than as post-electoral grand coalitions in Lijphart's European prototypes. This background helps us understand why Malaysia's coalition system after 2018 has been unstable and contested.

Since 2020, Malaysia has entered a period of coalition instability. The fall of PH in the Sheraton Move revealed how easily elites could defect and bring down a government (Ufen, 2021). PN under Muhyiddin Yassin survived only briefly, followed by further leadership changes and the eventual hung parliament in 15th General Election (GE15). In these moments, the monarchies played a decisive role in appointing prime ministers and shaping coalition outcomes, highlighting how Malaysia's system departs from a purely parliamentary model (Chin, 2023; Saleem, 2022). This pattern shows that coalition politics remains essential for forming governments but is no longer anchored in stable institutional rules.

At the same time, demographic and ideological changes have reshaped coalition competition. The expansion of the electorate through automatic voter registration and the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 years old (*Undi18*) created a younger and more diverse voting base, but studies show that ethnicity remains the strongest predictor of electoral outcomes (Dettman and Pepinsky, 2023). Regional factors, particularly the political assertiveness of East Malaysian states, also matter more in coalition bargaining than before. Meanwhile, PAS has emerged as the single largest party, demonstrating the rise of Islamic party in Malaysian politics. Recent studies show that PAS adapts its posture for federal coalitions while maintaining an uncompromising Islamist agenda in Kelantan, suggesting strategic flexibility without ideological moderation (Tayeb and Weiss, 2024).

These changes have also deepened political polarisation. Research on GE15 highlights the growth of affective polarisation, where parties mobilised ethnic and religious brands to strengthen their own in-groups, leaving less space for compromise (Saleem, 2022). As a result, Malaysia's coalitions have become fragile, shaped by elite directional, demographic pressures and identity politics. While the existing literature provides valuable insights into coalition breakdowns, electoral trends and ideological shifts, it remains fragmented. This systematic literature review (SLR) therefore synthesises 14 studies published between 2021 and 2025 to ask four questions: (1) How has coalition politics shaped governance and stability since GE14? (2) What factors explain coalition formation, re-alignment and collapse? (3) What role have institutions such as the monarchy, federalism and the electoral

system played? and (4) How have ethnic cleavages, Islamisation and demographic change influenced coalition dynamics and governance outcomes?

This review contributes to understanding Malaysia's political development in three ways. First, it clarifies how the erosion of permanent coalition politics after 2018 has reshaped governance, electoral competition and institutional mediation in a multiethnic democracy. Second, by systematically synthesising recent scholarship, it moves beyond event-driven analyses to identify recurring structural constraints affecting coalition durability and policy capacity. Third, the findings inform debates on Malaysia's democratic consolidation by showing how coalition instability, identity mobilisation and institutional intervention interact to shape political growth and reform prospects.

2 Methodology

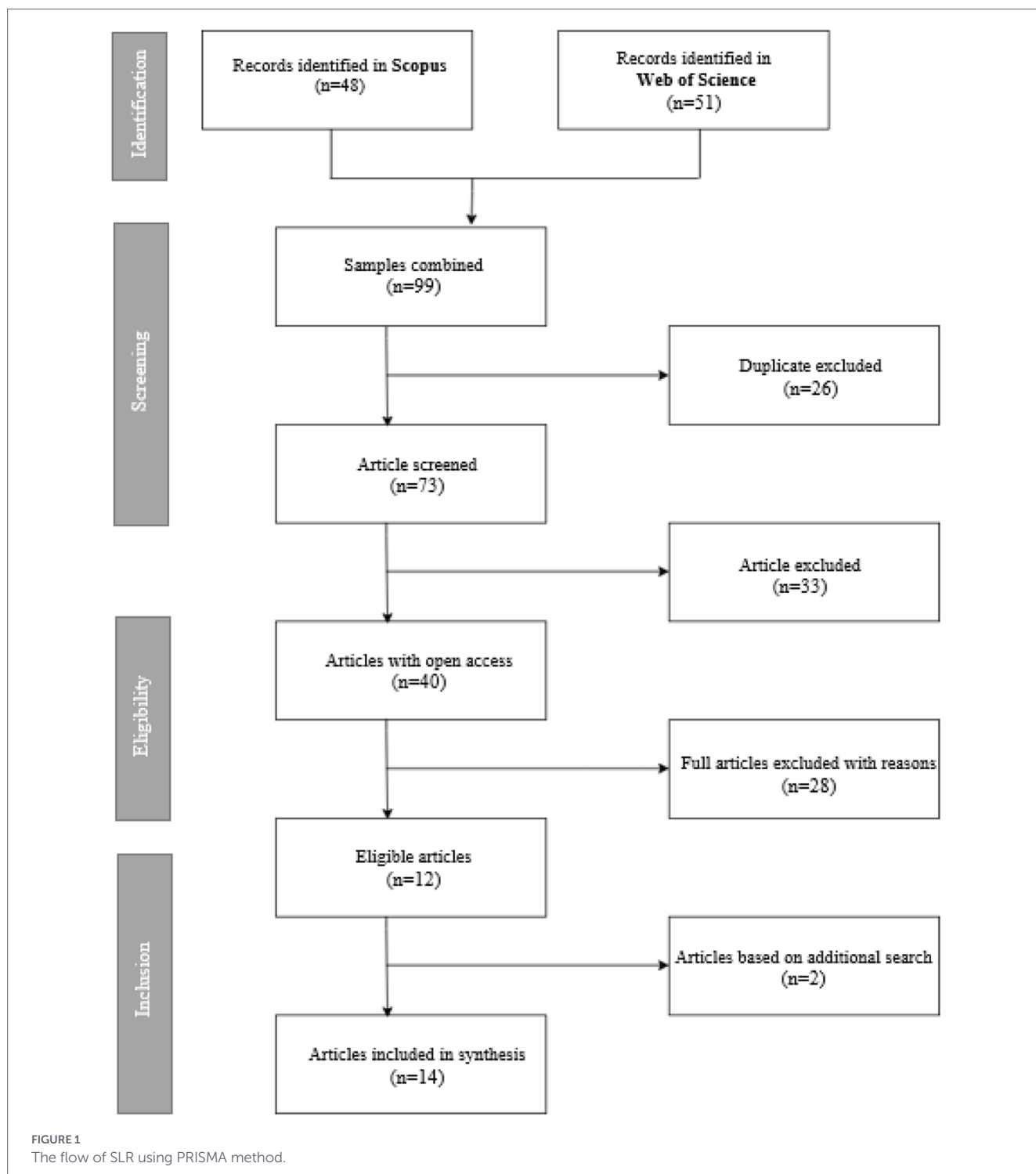
This study adopts the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2009) and aligns with methodological guidance for non-health disciplines provided by Shaffril et al. (2021). Following best practice, the review was conducted in four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility and synthesis. The process can be viewed in Figure 1.

2.1 Identification

The search strategy was designed to be comprehensive, transparent and replicable. Keywords were derived from the research questions and refined through synonym mapping and Boolean operators, as recommended by Kitchenham and Charters (2007) and Petticrew and Roberts (2006). Searches were conducted in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), supplemented by manual techniques such as backward and forward citation tracking (Shaffril et al., 2021). The search strings can be viewed in Table 1. The search period was limited to 2021–2025 to capture recent 5 years studies on Malaysia's coalition politics after the fall of PH in 2020. The number of journals earned based on year can be seen as Figure 2. Unfortunately, there is no journal that meets criteria for year 2025.

2.2 Screening

All retrieved records were imported into a reference manager and checked for duplicates using both DOI and title matching. Screening was conducted in two phases. First, titles and abstracts were examined to determine relevance, guided by predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Xiao and Watson, 2019). As can be seen in Table 2, only publications from 2021 onwards were included, as this period captures the political changes following the Sheraton Move in 2020, while earlier works were excluded for being outside the scope of analysis. Geographically, the focus was limited to studies on Malaysia, with works on other countries excluded to maintain contextual relevance. Conceptually, eligible studies were those that explicitly examined coalition politics including formation, bargaining, breakdown, re-alignment, ethnic power-sharing, elite negotiations and institutional roles. On the other side, articles that only mentioned coalitions briefly or concentrated on unrelated policy areas, such as economics, were excluded. In terms of source type, only peer-reviewed journal articles with full access were selected to ensure scholarly credibility, while



books, book chapters, grey literature (such as newspapers, blogs and non-academic reports) and theses were excluded. Finally, only works published in English or Malay were considered, while publications in other languages were excluded to ensure accessibility and consistency in analysis. This process follows the principle of transparency and replicability stressed by Shaffril et al. (2021).

2.3 Eligibility

The remaining full-text articles were then reviewed for eligibility. At this stage, works were excluded if they did not engage substantively

with coalition dynamics (e.g., studies of economic policy without political analysis). Only studies meeting moderate to high quality based on clarity of aims, methodological rigour and relevance to coalition politics, were included (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006; Shaffril et al., 2021). At the end, 14 manuscripts were retained for systematic synthesis.

2.4 Synthesis

The final set of studies was analysed using a two-step approach. First, descriptive synthesis provided an overview of publication trends,

TABLE 1 Search string.

Database	Query	Number of articles
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (Malaysia AND (“coalition politics” OR “coalition government” OR “power-sharing” OR “political alliance” OR “pakatan harapan” OR “barisan nasional” OR “perikatan nasional”)) AND PUBYEAR > 2020 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “SOC”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “ARTS”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”) OR LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “Malay”))	48
Web of Science	TS = (Malaysia AND (“coalition politics” OR “coalition government” OR “power-sharing” OR “political alliance” OR “Pakatan Harapan” OR “Barisan Nasional” OR “Perikatan Nasional”))	51

methods and theoretical frameworks (Tranfield et al., 2003). Second, thematic synthesis was employed to identify recurring arguments, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) coding framework. Codes were grouped into higher-order themes corresponding to the review questions: (1) governance and stability, (2) coalition formation and collapse, (3) institutional mediation and (4) ethnic, religious and demographic dynamics. This dual approach ensured both breadth and depth of analysis, consistent with recommendations for non-health SLR.

3 Results

3.1 Descriptive analysis

The 14 selected studies on Malaysia’s coalition politics between 2021 and 2025 encompass a diverse range of publication outlets, theoretical orientations and methodological approaches. In terms of temporal distribution, the majority of the articles were published after the 15th General Election (GE15) in 2022, with 10 out of 14 appearing in 2023 and 2024. This reflects the increased scholarly attention generated by the hung parliament and the subsequent formation of Anwar Ibrahim’s “unity government.” Earlier contributions from 2021 (Tayeb, 2021; Ufen, 2021; Ong, 2022) focus primarily on the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government and the establishment of Perikatan Nasional (PN), providing a baseline for understanding subsequent coalition changes.

From a disciplinary standpoint, most of the studies were published in political science and area studies journals, with journal such as Democratization, The Round Table and Asian Survey well represented. The details of journals presented in Figure 3. The geographical orientation of the authors is also diverse, including Malaysian scholars (e.g., Nadzri, 2022; Alias and Hamil, 2023; Fauzi et al., 2024; Wong, 2023; Chin, 2023) and international comparative scholars (e.g., Ufen, 2021; Weiss, 2024; Dettman and Pepinsky, 2023). This plurality of perspectives enriches the discourse, combining insider accounts of electoral dynamics with broader theoretical reflections on coalition politics and democratization.

Methodologically, the reviewed works employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Narrative analyses dominate, particularly in studies examining electoral outcomes and government formation (e.g., Chin, 2023; Weiss, 2024; Moten, 2023a, 2023b). Case studies provide depth into specific contexts, such as the resilience of BN in Pahang (Fauzi et al., 2024) and the struggles of the Democratic Action

Party (DAP) to reposition itself in a multiethnic environment (Dettman, 2024). Quantitative approaches are found in Dettman and Pepinsky (2023), who use constituency-level demographic and electoral data to explain voting patterns and in Fauzi et al. (2024), who employ GIS mapping of voting trends. Ong (2022) introduces an experimental element by quantifying the effect of opposition alliance campaigns on voter behaviour. Together, these methods provide both breadth and depth, balancing descriptive accounts with empirical testing.

This SLR develops Literature Review Matrix to simplify the insights of the articles as can be seen in Table 3. In terms of theoretical grounding, a number of studies explicitly reference frameworks of coalition theory, authoritarian legacies and ethnic power-sharing. Rather than situating Malaysia within Lijphart’s consociational model, Wong (2023) critically interrogates the limits of applying consociationalism to Malaysia’s experience, highlighting the distinct logic of permanent coalitions under competitive multiparty conditions. Dettman and Pepinsky (2023) link Malaysia’s cleavage structures to broader debates on authoritarian successor legacies, while Ufen (2021) applies coalition theory to explain the PH government’s downfall. Other studies are more descriptive, emphasising electoral outcomes without sustained theoretical engagement (e.g., Moten, 2023a, 2023b; Tayeb, 2021). This unevenness reflects the tension between empirical analysis of immediate political events and attempts to situate Malaysia’s coalition politics within comparative theory.

Substantively, the literature is dominated by three focal issues: (1) the collapse of dominant-party rule and the rise of fragmentation (Weiss and Suffian, 2023; Wong, 2023); (2) the role of ethnicity, Islamism and regional dynamics in shaping electoral outcomes (Chin, 2023; Alias and Hamil, 2023; Dettman, 2024; Dettman and Pepinsky, 2023); and (3) the institutional role of the monarchy in managing government formation (Chin, 2023; Weiss, 2024). While these themes recur across multiple studies, there is also evidence of growing scholarly attention to state-level variation (Fauzi et al., 2024) and to alliance design and campaign strategies (Ong, 2022).

Overall, the descriptive profile of these 14 articles shows a literature in transition. Earlier works examined Malaysia’s coalition politics as a product of dominant-party decline and fragile elite bargains. More recent contributions highlight the permanence of fragmentation, the salience of identity and regional cleavages and the re-emergence of extra-electoral institutions as arbiters of coalition formation. This trajectory suggests that coalition politics is now a central and enduring feature of Malaysia’s democratic contestation, rather than a temporary situation.

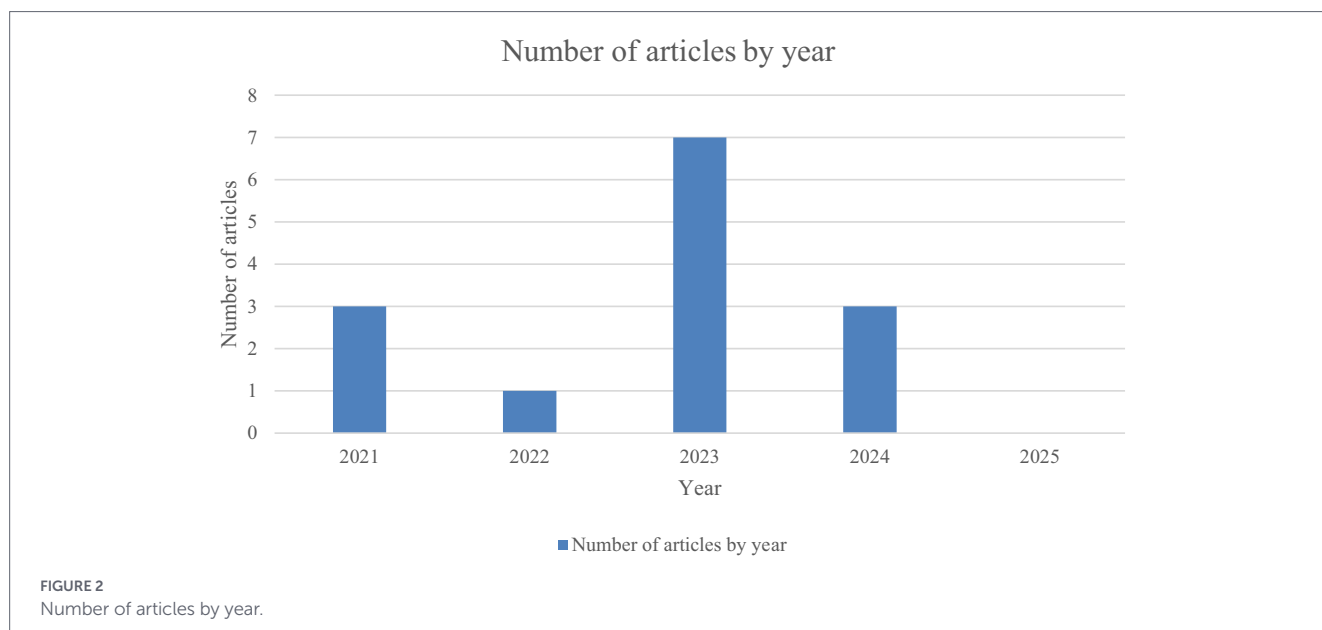


TABLE 2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeframe	Publications from 2021 onwards (to see the changes of coalition after Sheraton Move)	Publications before 2021
Geographical Scope	Studies focusing on Malaysia	Studies on other countries
Conceptual Focus	Explicit focus on coalition politics: formation, bargaining, breakdown, re-alignment, ethnic power-sharing, elite negotiations, institutional roles	Articles mentioning coalitions only in passing; studies focused solely on unrelated issues (e.g., economics, policy areas without coalition context).
Source Types	Peer-reviewed journal articles only with full access.	Books, chapters in book, grey literature (newspapers, blogs, non-scholarly reports) and theses/dissertations.
Language	English and Malay.	Publications in languages other than English/Malay.

3.2 Thematic analysis

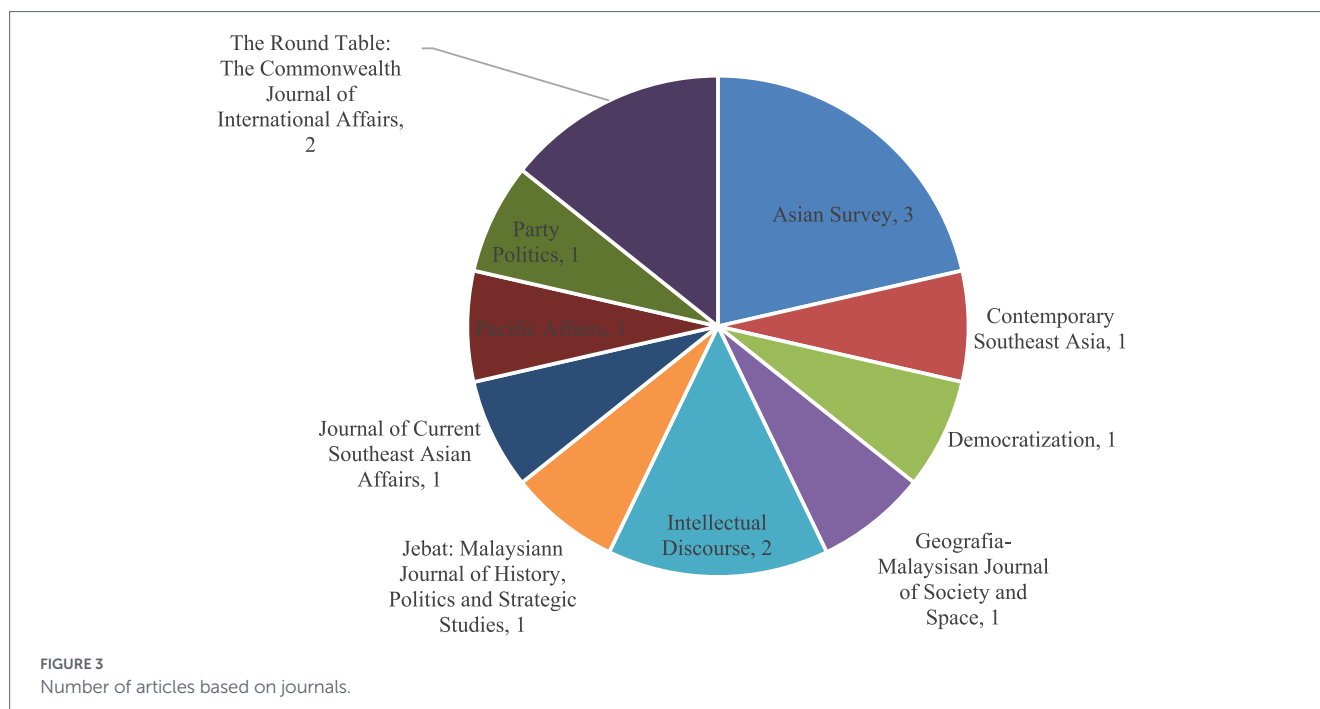
The 14 selected studies on Malaysia’s coalition politics between 2021 and 2025 reveal a rapidly transforming political landscape marked by fragmentation, ethnoreligious mobilisation and shifting institutional roles. While earlier literature tended to focus on the durability of Malaysia’s dominant-party system, the most recent works collectively highlight how coalition bargaining has become the new normal in an era of uncertainty. Thematically, six recurrent patterns emerge across the corpus: (1) the transition from dominant-party rule to fragmentation, (2) the persistence of ethnicity alongside new forms of regionalism, (3) the surge of Islamist mobilisation through Perikatan Nasional (PN), (4) the increasing importance of constitutional monarchy in coalition-making, (5) the role of opposition coordination and alliance design and (6) the limits of coalition durability in governance.

Although presented as six themes, the findings form a sequential pattern of institutional change and political reaction. The collapse of the dominant permanent coalition weakened pre-electoral coordination and encouraged fragmentation. This fragmentation, combined with intensified ethnic and religious competition, reduced incentives for moderation and increased elite defections. The Sheraton Move and subsequent hung parliaments institutionalised post-electoral bargaining as the new norm. Multi-cornered contests further eroded vote conversion efficiency, while regional coalitions such as GPS and GRS

gained bargaining leverage. Paradoxically, although Malaysia did not adopt proportional representation, coalition formation increasingly resembles Lijphart’s post-election grand coalition pattern in practice, albeit without its institutional safeguards.

3.2.1 Theme 1: fragmentation and the post-dominant party order

Several studies emphasise Malaysia’s decisive break from the long-standing Barisan Nasional (BN) hegemony towards a pluralised but unstable coalition system. Wong (2023) provides a historical narrative of coalition evolution, showing how Malaysia moved from a single dominant coalition to a multi-bloc system characterised by rivalry between multi-ethnic and monoethnic forces. Chin (2023) similarly highlights how the inconclusive outcome of the 2022 general election (GE15) produced a hung parliament and required royal intervention to form government. Weiss and Suffian (2023) frame this development as the collapse of Malaysia’s dominant-party system, although they caution that illiberal reconsolidation remains possible. Weiss (2024) further notes that while a unity government emerged in 2023, it survived under considerable pressure, lacking the stability of earlier eras. Together, these works reveal fragmentation as the central feature of Malaysia’s coalition order, transforming political competition into a fluid process of elite bargaining after elections.



3.2.2 Theme 2: ethnic cleavages persist, but regionalism rises

While ethnic politics remains a consistent discussion, several studies point to the increasing salience of regional cleavages in shaping coalition politics. [Dettman and Pepinsky \(2023\)](#) demonstrate that ethnicity continues to be the most powerful predictor of voting behaviour, yet regional divides between Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo, as well as within Peninsular itself, are becoming more pronounced. [Dettman \(2024\)](#) adds that the Democratic Action Party (DAP), despite its multi-ethnic positioning, remains constrained by perceptions of being a Chinese party, underscoring the persistence of ethnic boundary enforcement. [Fauzi et al. \(2024\)](#) provide a state-level analysis in Pahang, showing how BN retained pockets of dominance through ethnic-based loyalties in FELDA settlements despite its national decline. [Wong \(2023\)](#) also underlines the role of Borneo-based coalitions in reshaping national bargaining dynamics. Collectively, these findings indicate that while ethnicity remains central, regionalism, particularly the autonomy of East Malaysian parties, now decisively shapes coalition negotiations.

3.2.3 Theme 3: Islamist mobilisation and the rise of Perikatan Nasional

A number of works highlight the growing centrality of Islamist mobilisation in Malaysia's coalition politics. [Chin \(2023\)](#) identifies PAS's emergence as the single largest party in parliament as the most significant outcome of GE15, with implications for Malaysia's image as a moderate Muslim-majority state. [Alias and Hamil \(2023\)](#) examine PN's campaign strategies, showing how religious and ethnic narratives, amplified through digital media, contributed to the coalition's electoral breakthrough. [Moten \(2023a, 2023b\)](#) reinforces these findings with descriptive accounts of PN's consolidation across state and federal contests, pointing to its growing electoral appeal in Malay-majority areas. Taken together,

these studies suggest that PN's rise reflects the potency of religious framing, strategic mobilisation and digital campaigning in reshaping Malaysia's coalition competition.

3.2.4 Theme 4: constitutional monarchy and extra-electoral arbiters

In the absence of decisive electoral outcomes, the monarchy has emerged as an 'essential arbiter' in coalition politics. [Chin \(2023\)](#) documents how the King's intervention following the GE15 deadlock enabled the formation of Anwar Ibrahim's unity government. [Weiss \(2024\)](#) similarly notes that the government's legitimacy derived less from electoral coherence and more from royal sanction. This theme underscores the evolving role of constitutional monarchy in coalition-building, where royal mediation has become a recurring mechanism for stabilising government formation amid hung parliaments. Rather than being a one-off occurrence, these interventions now appear embedded within Malaysia's coalition dynamics.

3.2.5 Theme 5: opposition coordination and Alliance design

Coordination among opposition parties has long been a determinant of coalition success and recent studies reaffirm this. [Ong \(2022\)](#) demonstrates that during GE14, joint opposition campaigning such as shared logos and cross-party endorsements increased strategic voting and contributed significantly to Pakatan Harapan's victory. In contrast, [Moten \(2023b\)](#) and [Weiss and Suffian \(2023\)](#) highlight that fragmentation and lack of coordination in GE15 produced a hung parliament and eroded opposition effectiveness. These findings suggest that building alliances is still important. Opposition parties gain more support when they share resources and branding, but disunity results in wasted votes and fragile coalitions.

TABLE 3 Literature review matrix: Malaysia coalition politics (2021–2025).

Author(s)	Year	Title	Objective of study	Theory used	Key findings	Limitation
Nadzri, M. N.	2022	In the Name of Covid-19: Democratic Reversal and the Return of Authoritarian Malaysia under Muhyiddin's Perikatan Nasional	To examine how PN leveraged Covid-19 to consolidate power.	Schedler's new institutionalism; mandate theory	Covid-19 sustained PN temporarily but governance failures led to collapse.	Limited to PN period, secondary data
Moten, A. R.	2023	Shifting Tides: Malaysia's 2023 State Assembly Elections	To analyze GE15 aftermath in state elections.	Not explicit	PN's rise and PH-BN collaboration showed fragmentation.	Mostly descriptive
Tayeb, A.	2021	Malaysia in 2020: Fragile Coalitional Politics and Democratic Regression	To assess PH's fall and PN's weak legitimacy.	Party-hopping & monarchy	PN survived by avoiding no-confidence but remained unstable.	Narrow temporal scope
Alias, A. Y., & Hamil, J.	2023	Keberkesanan Strategi Perikatan Nasional dalam PRU15 di Semenanjung Malaysia	To study PN's campaign strategies.	Party ID & Islamist framing	PN's ethno-religious narratives and social media boosted PAS-PN gains.	Focus only on Peninsular Malaysia
Ufen, A.	2021	The Downfall of Pakatan Harapan in Malaysia	To explain PH's collapse.	Coalition theory	PH failed due to intra-party conflicts; ethno-religious opposition resurged.	Stops at PN's rise
Weiss, M. L., & Suffian, I.	2023	Decline and Fall of Malaysia's Dominant-Party System	To examine end of dominant-party politics.	Party-system institutionalization	BN's collapse marked end of dominance, but illiberal reconsolidation possible.	Predictive claims not fully tested
Dettman, S.	2024	Challenges of Ethnic Party Adaptation in Power-Sharing Systems	To study barriers for DAP adapting to multiethnic politics.	Ethnic power-sharing theory	DAP constrained by ethnic norms and rivals' boundary protection.	Single case (DAP)
Moten, A. R.	2023	The 15th General Elections in Malaysia: Party Polarisation, Shifting Coalitions and the Hung Parliament	To analyze GE15 outcome and hung parliament.	Institutionalization lens (implicit)	GE15 showed fragmentation and unstable coalition bargaining.	Descriptive, light theoretical grounding
Ong, E.	2021	What Are We Voting For? Opposition Alliance Joint Campaigns in Electoral Autocracies	To test effect of opposition joint campaigns (GE14).	Alliance & electoral authoritarianism	Joint campaigns increased strategic voting by 10 points; enabled PH victory.	Focuses on GE14, less on post-2018
Weiss, M. L.	2024	Malaysia in 2023: Reconsolidation under Pressure	To assess Anwar's unity government in 2023.	Not explicit	Unity government survived but fragile; monarch crucial.	Short-term snapshot
Fauzi, R. et al.	2024	Ethnics in Coalition: An Analysis of Stronghold State-Level Party's Performance and Trend	To analyze BN's resilience in Pahang via ethnicity & coalition.	Coalition durability; ethnic voting	BN decline evident, yet retained Pahang through FELDA loyalty.	Single state focus (Pahang); quantitative GIS only

(Continued)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Objective of study	Theory used	Key findings	Limitation
Wong, C.-H.	2023	One, Two and Now Several: The Evolution of Coalition Politics in Malaysia	To contextualize GE15 within coalition evolution.	Consociationalism; patronage politics	Coalition politics evolved from one, two, several; toxic multiethnic–monoethnic rivalry persists.	Analytical, less empirical
Chin, J.	2023	Anwar's Long Walk to Power: the 2022 Malaysian General Elections	To examine GE15 and Anwar's return.	Constitutional monarchy; identity politics	PAS became largest party; monarchy pivotal in gov't formation; UMNO's support for PH unexpected.	Mainly narrative, limited theoretical contribution
Dettman, S. & Pepinsky, T.	2023	Demographic Structure and Voting Behaviour during Democratization: Evidence from Malaysia's 2022 Election	To analyze how demographics shaped GE15 voting.	Cleavage theory; authoritarian legacies	Ethnicity still central but regional cleavages gained salience; democratization increased uncertainty.	Aggregate constituency-level data only, not individual surveys

3.2.6 Theme 6: coalition durability, governance strain and policy space

Finally, several studies address the challenges of sustaining coalition governments once in office. Weiss (2024) observes that Anwar's unity government faced fiscal pressures, electoral tests and sociocultural divides that constrained its policy options. Ufen (2021) and Tayeb (2021) recount how earlier governments, first PH and later PN, collapsed due to unresolved tensions within heterogeneous coalitions. These analyses converge on the conclusion that Malaysia's coalitions, while necessary for governance in a fragmented system, are highly fragile. Policy space is constrained by the need to balance diverse ideological and ethno-religious demands, making governance inherently unstable.

4 Discussion

The findings address the four research questions in the following ways. First, coalition politics since GE14 has shaped governance by producing fragmented rule, frequent post-election bargaining and constrained policy capacity. Second, coalition formation and collapse are driven by weak pre-electoral coordination, elite defections, and the mobilisation of ethnic and religious identities. Third, institutions such as the monarchies and federal–state relations now play a regular mediating role during electoral deadlock. Fourth, ethnic cleavages remain decisive, while Islamisation and demographic change have intensified coalition competition without fundamentally altering ethnic voting patterns.

Malaysia's coalition politics since 2018 remains central but has become less stable. Compared with classic theory, the pattern supports Horowitz more than Lijphart. Lijphart argued that elite cooperation, proportionality, segmental autonomy and mutual veto can stabilise

divided societies, while Horowitz warned that ethnic incentives and outbidding make elite bargains fragile (Lijphart, 1977; Horowitz, 1985). In Malaysia, long-run stability under BN often looked consociational but rested heavily on UMNO's dominance and patronage rather than genuine power sharing, as noted in Malaysia-focused work on consociational practice (Yusoff, 1992). Taken with recent studies, the post-2018 landscape resembles a post-permanent-coalition settlement rather than a post-consociational one. Coalitions still form governments, but bargains are short-lived, contingent and very sensitive to identity mobilisation and institutional arbiters such as the monarchies (Wong, 2023; Chin, 2023; Weiss, 2024).

Since 2020, the process of government formation has depended more on negotiation after elections than on strong pre-electoral arrangements. The Sheraton Move revealed low switching costs for elites and weak coalition discipline and it showed how quickly a cross-bloc bargain can fall apart (Ufen, 2021). GE15 produced a hung parliament that required royal intervention to identify a prime minister and assemble a multi-party supports, later known as a Unity Government (Chin, 2023; Weiss, 2024). The result is a mixed practice where the choice of the executive depends on seat numbers and the palace's role as mediator during deadlock, rather than on clear and predictable parliamentary rules alone (Ufen, 2021; Chin, 2023; Weiss, 2024).

The social basis of political competition has changed less than early reformers expected. *Undi18* and automatic registration expanded the electorate, but ethnicity still shapes voter choices and coalition bargaining. Using constituency-level evidence from GE15, Dettman and Pepinsky (2023) show that ethnic composition is still the strongest predictor of results, even as regional differences grow between Borneo and the Peninsula and within the Peninsula itself. Wong (2023) places this in a broader shift from one dominant coalition to several competitive coalitions that must negotiate seriously with East Malaysian parties. State-level analysis in Pahang shows how FELDA settlements and local demographics maintain BN's strength despite its national decline (Fauzi et al., 2024). At the party level, Dettman's study of DAP shows that ethnic boundaries restrict efforts to reposition the party as

multi-ethnic (Dettman, 2024). Taken together, these studies show why national coalitions must account for state-level concessions and why regional kingmakers are more important than before.

Islamisation has further reshaped the space of political bargaining. After GE15, PAS became the largest single party in parliament and its role in PN strengthened the influence of religious identity in Malay-majority areas (Chin, 2023). Studies show that PN's religious and ethnic messages, spread widely through digital campaigning, brought seat gains, especially in constituencies with large Malay populations (Alias and Hamil, 2023; Moten, 2023a; Moten, 2023b). This trend increases the costs of sustaining any multi-ethnic governing bloc and reduces the space for cross-ethnic policy compromises at the federal level.

Alliance building and opposition coordination remain central to political outcomes. Under competitive authoritarian conditions before 2018, joint branding and cross-party endorsements encouraged strategic voting and strengthened opposition cooperation (Ong, 2022). After 2018, however, fragmentation led to multi-cornered contests and wasted votes, which contributed to the hung parliament in 2022 and prolonged uncertainty (Weiss and Suffian, 2023; Moten, 2023b). The implication is that credible pre-electoral pacts, disciplined seat-sharing and consistent joint messaging are still necessary to win marginal seats and to build more durable coalitions after elections.

The capacity to govern under diverse coalitions remains limited. Weiss shows that while the Unity Government stabilised in 2023, it operated under tight fiscal limits and ongoing sociocultural tensions, leaving little space for major reforms (Weiss, 2024). Earlier analyses of the PH collapse highlight similar weaknesses. Broad ideological divisions, weak mechanisms for internal dispute resolution and unclear priorities increased the risk of defections or breakdowns (Ufen, 2021; Tayeb, 2021). If Horowitz is correct that institutions cannot by themselves contain ethnic incentives, then stability requires either repeated, enforceable bargains across ethnic lines or electoral and party rules that reduce the gains from polarising appeals. Current evidence shows that neither condition is consistently present (Weiss, 2024; Ufen, 2021; Tayeb, 2021).

Polarisation has also intensified. Parties and coalitions increasingly mobilise around in-group and out-group identities, which narrows the space for cross-ethnic persuasion and entrenches core electorates (Weiss and Suffian, 2023; Chin, 2023; Wong, 2023). Combined with the monarchy's more active role during deadlock and the pivotal bargaining power of Borneo coalitions, this creates a fragile equilibrium. Governments can still be formed, but their durability is costly and easily reversed. Oppositions remain competitive, but coordination problems persist.

In summary, the review shows a shift from a dominant-party system that looked consociational to a brokered multi-coalition order. Ethnic and regional divides continue to shape both voter behaviour and party strategies (Wong, 2023; Dettman and Pepinsky, 2023). Islamisation has made identity issues harder to compromise on (Chin, 2023; Alias and Hamil, 2023; Moten, 2023a, 2023b). The monarchy now plays a regular role in government formation (Weiss, 2024; Ufen, 2021; Tayeb, 2021). Opposition coordination and alliance building remain important, but they do not guarantee stable rule (Ong, 2022; Weiss and Suffian, 2023). Overall, coalition politics since GE14 has shaped governance and stability by creating repeated openings for bargaining after elections. Coalitions form, shift and collapse depending on elite incentives, ethnic structures, regional brokers and

campaign coordination, while institutions such as the monarchy, federal-state relations and electoral rules shape their survival (Weiss, 2024; Wong, 2023).

5 Conclusion

This systematic review shows that coalition politics remains central to government formation in Malaysia but has become markedly less stable since 2018. Across the reviewed studies, six consistent findings emerge. These include the erosion of permanent coalition discipline, persistent ethnic voting patterns alongside rising regional bargaining power, the increased salience of Islamist mobilisation, the regular intervention of the federal monarchy during periods of deadlock, the importance of alliance coordination for electoral outcomes and the limited governing capacity of heterogeneous coalitions. Taken together, these findings explain why governments in the post-2018 period are easier to form than to sustain.

The reviewed work still leaves important gaps. Many studies are descriptive and do not test clear cause and effect. Evidence indicates that the monarch matters during deadlock, yet systematic measures of how and when royal signals shape party choices in relation to seat numbers remain limited. Relations between the federal and state levels are discussed, yet this review lack comparative evidence across states and over time. The effect of *Undi18* and automatic registration is often mentioned, but evidence on the behaviour of new voters remains limited. While the allocation of cabinet positions and elite appointments during the 2020 crisis has been examined in earlier work (for example Wong, 2020), and descriptive tracking of political appointments to government-linked companies is available through policy institutes such as IDEAS (Anon, 2024), systematic and comparative analysis of how such allocations affect coalition loyalty and defection over time remains limited in the post-2021 literature reviewed here.

Future research should move from description to explanation. First, pre-electoral agreements, seat-sharing arrangements and joint branding should be evaluated for their effects on post-electoral survival using constituency-level results and survey experiments. Second, coalition governance should be examined with verifiable indicators that link cabinet portfolios, committee posts and published budget decisions to subsequent party behaviour and defections. Third, the monarch's role during deadlock should be assessed with transparent event timelines and observable public statements, with findings compared across episodes since 2020. Fourth, subnational datasets that track transfers, projects and policy concessions to East Malaysian parties should be constructed to test whether these patterns correlate with coalition endurance. Fifth, the effects of Islamisation and digital campaigns should be estimated by pairing text and advertising content with seat-level outcomes. Lastly, the cohort effects of *Undi18* should be identified through panel surveys to determine whether youth participation expands persuasion opportunities or primarily amplifies existing ethnic patterns. Addressing these gaps will clarify how Malaysian coalitions are built, how they hold together and why they sometimes fail. It will also improve the value of Malaysia as a case for theories of coalition politics in multiethnic democracies and offer evidence that can inform practical choices by parties and policymakers.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

MM: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. KK: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. NM: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2026.1721966/full#supplementary-material>

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