


Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)'S Reform and Governance in Malaysia

Summugam Rengasamy¹, Kamarul Zaman Haji Yusoff^{2*}, Rabiul Islam³

^{1,2,3} School of International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: kzaman@uum.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the political trajectory and governance performance of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) during its two tenures in federal government: the Pakatan Harapan (PH) administration (2018–2020) and the Unity Government (2022–2024). PKR, born out of the 1998 Reformasi movement, has long positioned itself as a multiracial reformist party challenging Malaysia's entrenched ethnic politics. However, its time in government raised critical questions about the extent to which it upheld its reformist ideals in the face of coalition constraints and realpolitik. Utilizing centripetalism and reform theories, the study draws on qualitative data including elite interviews and document analysis to assess PKR's institutional behavior, reform strategy, and ideological consistency. The findings reveal that while PKR maintained its reformist rhetoric and inclusive ethos, its reform delivery was diluted by internal fragmentation, elite resistance, and coalition bargaining. The study contributes to understanding the strategic dilemmas faced by reformist parties in plural societies and underscores the challenges of translating ideals into policy in coalition-dominated governance.

Keywords: PKR, Reformasi, coalition politics, centripetalism, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR) emerged from the Reformasi movement of 1998, championing democratic reform, institutional integrity, and social justice in Malaysia's political landscape. As a central component of the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH), PKR secured a historic victory in the 14th General Election (GE14) in 2018, ending over six decades of Barisan Nasional (BN) dominance. The PH administration, led initially by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and later expected to transition to PKR president Anwar Ibrahim, was short-lived due to the 2020 "Sheraton Move," which fractured the coalition and shifted the nation back into political instability (Welsh, 2021; Pepinsky, 2020). Despite the setback, PKR remained a key political force and re-emerged in government following the formation of the Unity Government in late 2022, with Anwar Ibrahim finally assuming the premiership in November of that year (The Straits Times, 2022; Gomez, 2023).

The return to power presented both opportunities and challenges for PKR, now navigating the complex realities of governance in a fragmented and pragmatic political environment. While the party continues to advocate reform-oriented policies, it has faced criticism for compromises and limited progress on its initial reform agenda, raising questions about the balance between ideological commitments and political survival (Case, 2023; Chin and Tapsell, 2024). This paper seeks to assess PKR's performance during its two tenures in federal government first under Pakatan Harapan (2018–2020) and more recently within the Unity Government (2022–2024) with a focus on governance, policy implementation, coalition dynamics, and public perception. Understanding PKR's evolution

from its reformist roots to its current role in *realpolitik* is crucial for evaluating the future of democratic reform and coalition politics in Malaysia.

Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), rooted in the 1998 Reformasi movement, entered Malaysia's political mainstream with the aim of dismantling race-based politics and promoting democratic reform, social justice, and the rule of law. Its rise symbolized hope for a more inclusive and accountable political system, especially in contrast to UMNO's long-standing dominance under the consociationalism model. However, PKR's electoral performance has been mixed over the years, and its transition from a protest movement to a governing party raised serious questions about its ability to sustain reformist ideals within entrenched structures of ethnic patronage and elite negotiations.

During the Pakatan Harapan (PH) administration (2018–2020), PKR secured the largest number of seats among coalition members and helped end six decades of Barisan Nasional rule. Despite initial public optimism, the coalition was soon undermined by internal power struggles, particularly between Anwar Ibrahim and then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Reforms like asset declarations and judicial independence were proposed but largely stalled due to intra-coalition resistance and bureaucratic inertia. The eventual collapse of the PH government during the 2020 Sheraton Move exposed the fragility of PKR's position and the limitations of governing through a fragmented coalition.

Under the Unity Government (2022–2024), PKR held fewer seats but took the lead with Anwar Ibrahim as Prime Minister. Although this coalition restored political stability, it required alliances with ideological opponents such as UMNO and GPS, forcing PKR to soften its reform agenda. Institutional transformation remained elusive due to coalition bargaining and resistance from conservative actors. As a result, public trust particularly among young and urban voters—began to erode. This study critically interrogates whether PKR's compromises were strategic necessities or a dilution of its core reformist mission, providing insight into the party's adaptability and the enduring challenges of coalition-based governance in Malaysia.

This paper aims to critically assess the performance of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) during its two distinct governing phases under the Pakatan Harapan administration (2018–2020) and the Unity Government (2022–2024) by examining whether the party has remained faithful to its reformist ideals or compromised them in response to coalition politics and structural constraints. Drawing on centripetalism and reform theories, the study investigates PKR's strategic recalibrations, ideological consistency, and institutional behaviour across both periods. It explores the tensions between reform ambition and political pragmatism, using qualitative methods such as document analysis and elite interviews to evaluate PKR's policy delivery, coalition dynamics, and public perception. Ultimately, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how reformist parties navigate governance in multiethnic, coalition-based political systems like Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Centripetalism Theory and PKR's Political Identity

Centripetalism, as conceptualized by Benjamin Reilly (2001), challenges the long-dominant consociationalism model that promotes ethnic compartmentalization in power-sharing. Instead, centripetalism advocates for institutional designs and political incentives that encourage cross-ethnic cooperation, inclusive representation, and moderate coalition-building. It proposes that democracy in divided societies is best served when political institutions depoliticize ethnicity and create incentives for broad-based, integrative political behaviour (Reilly, 2001).

PKR exemplifies this theory in several dimensions. Unlike ethnic-based parties like UMNO (Malay), MCA (Chinese), or MIC (Indian), PKR maintains a non-communal party structure and fielded diverse candidates across ethnic and regional lines. Its multiracial leadership, with representation from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and East Malaysian communities, supports a unifying ideological stance focused on justice, anti-discrimination, and good governance. This normative positioning reinforces PKR's centripetal orientation and distinguishes it from the ethno-religious populism that characterizes many of its rivals (Welsh, 2021; Gomez, 2023).

However, the implementation of centripetal principles has faced substantial limitations. During the PH administration, PKR's centrist positioning was often undermined by its coalition partner BERSATU, whose Malay-first policies under Mahathir Mohamad contradicted PKR's reformist narrative. The reluctance to push forward multiracial reforms, especially concerning affirmative action and institutional equity, reflected the limits of centripetal politics in the face of intra-coalition compromise (Case, 2023).

In the Unity Government era (2022–2024), centripetal ideals were further diluted. Anwar Ibrahim's leadership required partnerships with UMNO and regional parties such as Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS), whose parochial and sometimes conservative agendas constrained PKR's reform ambitions. The need to maintain coalition stability resulted in ideological moderation, often to the disappointment of reform-minded supporters, particularly among urban and youth voters (Chai, 2024).

Thus, while PKR has maintained a strong normative commitment to centripetalism in party structure and electoral strategy, the political and institutional environment in Malaysia—dominated by identity politics, communal narratives, and patronage-based governance—has consistently challenged its ability to translate these ideals into policy outcomes.

Reform Theory and PKR's Strategic Calculus

The article also engages with reform theory, particularly as articulated by Boeri et al. (2006), which identifies four key strategic pathways through which political parties or governments can pursue structural reform: (1) exploiting a parliamentary majority, (2) engaging in base-widening through coalition expansion, (3) employing divide-and-conquer tactics to neutralize opposition, and (4) utilizing external constraints such as economic crises or public pressure to justify reform.

PH Government (2018–2020): Parliamentary Majority Undermined by Elite Rivalry: PKR entered the PH government in 2018 with the largest number of parliamentary seats among coalition members (49 MPs), giving it formal political leverage. However, the party was unable to capitalize on this advantage due to a lack of executive control. Mahathir Mohamad of BERSATU held the premiership, and the promised power transition to Anwar Ibrahim remained indefinitely delayed. This uncertainty sowed distrust and factionalism within PKR, notably between Anwar and then-Deputy President Azmin Ali, whose eventual defection triggered the infamous Sheraton Move and the collapse of the PH administration (Welsh, 2021).

Despite proposing reforms such as the establishment of the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC), mandatory asset declarations, and the strengthening of parliamentary select committees, most of these initiatives were either stalled or watered down due to intra-coalition resistance and bureaucratic inertia. The episode highlighted the constraints of attempting reforms without full control of the executive and underscored the importance of elite consensus in achieving legislative transformation (Gomez, 2023).

Unity Government (2022–2024): Base-Widening Strategy with Reform Trade-Offs: In the aftermath of GE15, PKR returned to power under a vastly different political configuration. With only 31 parliamentary seats, the party lacked numerical strength but managed to lead the government under Anwar's premiership. This was achieved by forming a broad-based Unity Government that included ideologically diverse and historically antagonistic parties such as UMNO, GPS, and GRS.

This base-widening strategy provided the necessary parliamentary support and political stability, but at the cost of reform flexibility. Key reform proposals including the restructuring of government-linked companies (GLCs), amendments to the Sedition Act, and curbs on political patronage—were either delayed or diluted to avoid offending coalition partners. The internal compromise necessary to maintain the Unity Government weakened PKR's ability to deliver on its long-standing reform commitments (Case, 2023; Chai, 2024).

External Constraints: Opportunity and Burden: Reform theory also emphasizes the role of external constraints as catalysts for change. For PKR, the post-COVID-19 economic downturn, rising inflation, and a disillusioned youth electorate provided both pressure and justification for structural reforms. However, these crises also redirected governmental priorities toward immediate economic relief, stimulus measures, and social protection—often at the expense of deeper institutional restructuring.

The Unity Government's focus on the “Malaysia Madani” agenda a platform emphasizing inclusive development, fiscal responsibility, and moral governance reflected this shift. While rhetorically aligned with reformist goals, the actual policy execution often lacked boldness, reinforcing public perceptions of reform fatigue and political inconsistency (Straits Times, 2022; Chai, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology rooted in interpretivist epistemology to examine the strategic reform behaviour of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) during its participation in two Malaysian coalition governments: the Pakatan Harapan (2018–2020) and the Unity Government (2022–2024). The inquiry does not merely assess the outcomes of PKR's reform agenda but aims to understand the deeper motivations, ideological tensions, institutional barriers, and strategic adaptations that shaped the party's performance in power. Given the complexity of Malaysia's political landscape characterised by ethnic pluralism, coalition fragmentation, and entrenched patronage networks qualitative research offers the flexibility and depth required to capture the nuances of reformist governance.

The research integrates two principal qualitative techniques: (1) documentary and archival analysis, and (2) elite structured interviews. Both methods are applied longitudinally, spanning the 1998 Reformasi movement to the end of the Unity Government's tenure in 2024. The triangulation of textual and interview data enhances the reliability and validity of findings and aligns with best practices in qualitative political research.

Data Collection: Documentary and Archival Analysis

The first methodological pillar involved systematic documentary analysis of a wide array of primary and secondary sources, chosen to provide a textured understanding of PKR's institutional trajectory and strategic calculus. Documents analysed spanned over two decades of Malaysian political development and included the following key categories:

a) PKR Manifestos

Party manifestos such as *Agenda Reformasi*, *Harapan Baru*, and *Kita Selamat, Kita Stabil* were closely examined to assess PKR's declared reform priorities, ideological framing, and rhetorical consistency. These documents served as benchmarks for comparing intended versus actual reform implementation and were particularly useful for tracing shifts in tone and strategy between different electoral cycles.

b) Parliamentary Records (Hansard)

Debates from the Dewan Rakyat, especially those involving PKR Members of Parliament between 2018 and 2024, were analysed to capture parliamentary discourse around key institutional reforms. These included discussions on the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC), judiciary independence, electoral reform, asset declaration, and the role of GLCs (Government-Linked Companies). Hansard analysis enabled insight into PKR's legislative strategy, intra-coalition contestations, and reactions to crises such as the Sheraton Move.

c) Electoral Commission Data

Election data from the 14th (2018) and 15th (2022) General Elections, along with outcomes from various state elections and by elections between 2018 and 2024, were collected from the official Election Commission of Malaysia. These data sets were used to evaluate PKR's performance over time by region, ethnicity, and coalition configuration and to assess the party's leverage in post-election negotiations. Patterns in seat distribution and voter behaviour also helped explain shifts in the party's strategic alliances and reform tone.

d) Party Congress Resolutions

Annual resolutions and speeches from PKR's national congresses (2018–2024) were mined for evidence of intra-party debate, ideological recalibration, and leadership positioning. These documents provided critical insight into how the party interpreted and responded to coalition challenges, reforming blockages, and public dissatisfaction. They also revealed internal tensions between pragmatists and idealists within the party leadership.

e) Media Reports and Opinion Columns

Reports from both mainstream (e.g., *The Star*, *New Straits Times*) and independent or alternative media (e.g., *Malaysiakini*, *Astro Awani*, *Sinar Harian*) were consulted to contextualize real-time narratives, elite conflicts, and public sentiment. These sources helped corroborate or challenge official narratives and were particularly valuable in capturing perspectives outside formal institutional discourse. By drawing on this diverse range of documentary evidence, the study was able to create a longitudinal, multi-dimensional map of PKR's reformist claims, strategic recalibrations, and performance gaps across different governing arrangements.

Field Research: Structured Elite Interviews

To complement the documentary analysis and incorporate first-hand political insight, the second methodological component comprised structured elite interviews. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, targeting individuals with direct knowledge of PKR's internal deliberations, coalition negotiations, or policy formulation processes. The inclusion of both party insiders and political analysts allowed for a more balanced and reflexive evaluation of the data.

The elite interview participants included:

Johari Abdul – Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat and a senior PKR leader. He provided detailed perspectives on parliamentary reform initiatives, the institutional legacy of the Sheraton Move, and internal party realignments.

Dr. P. Ramasamy – Former Deputy Chief Minister of Penang and a respected academic-turned-politician. Ramasamy offered a critical view of PKR's compromises with UMNO during the Unity Government period and expressed concern over the erosion of reform momentum.

Prof. Dr. Sivamurugan Pandian – A political scientist at University Sains Malaysia who specialises in coalition politics and party systems. He provided a macro-level interpretation of Malaysia's shifting coalition landscape and evaluated the effectiveness of PKR's centripetal strategies under political pressure.

Prof. Dr. Mohammad Agus Yusoff – Former Director-General of J-KOM and a long-time academic at University Kebangsaan Malaysia. His insights focused on Anwar Ibrahim's leadership style, administrative balancing acts, and PKR's communication strategy with civil society and bureaucratic institutions.

Each interview followed a semi-structured protocol, with predefined questions aligned to the research objectives but sufficient flexibility to allow elaboration on key events or individual experiences. Topics covered included reform strategy formulation, elite negotiations, coalition management, ideological trade-offs, and policy delivery bottlenecks.

Interviews were conducted in-person or via secure virtual platforms, depending on the participant's availability and pandemic-related constraints. With informed consent, all interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised where appropriate to protect political sensitivities. Transcripts were then coded thematically.

Analytical Strategy and Ethical Integrity

The data analysis followed a hybrid thematic coding approach, combining deductive codes drawn from the theoretical framework (centripetalism and reform theory) with inductive codes that emerged organically during the data collection process. Key themes identified included:

- ✓ Reform prioritisation vs. political compromise
- ✓ Coalition negotiation strategies
- ✓ Elite distrust and fragmentation
- ✓ Centripetal appeals vs. ethnic mobilisation
- ✓ Strategic retreat and ideological recalibration
- ✓ Narrative fatigue among reformist constituencies

Coding was manually validated, cross-checked with secondary sources, and peer-reviewed to ensure consistency and analytical robustness.

Three forms of triangulation were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings:

Source triangulation – Comparing party documents, academic analyses, and media accounts.

Methodological triangulation – Integrating document analysis with field interviews.

Investigator triangulation – Incorporating feedback from research supervisors, peer reviewers, and other academic stakeholders during the manuscript drafting process.

On the ethical front, the study adhered strictly to qualitative research protocols. All interviewees received briefing statements outlining the scope and objectives of the research and were asked to sign consent forms before participating. Anonymity was preserved where requested, and politically sensitive quotations were vetted for accuracy and fairness. Data were securely stored, and ethical clearance was obtained in line with institutional guidelines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategic Shifts in Coalition Dynamics

The strategic behavior of PKR in government reveals significant variation across the two governing periods under study PH, 2018–2020, and the Unity Government, 2022–2024. These variations are not merely electoral in nature but reflect deeper shifts in coalition dynamics, leadership power, reform space and the ability to negotiate ideological priorities. PH Government (2018–2020): Largest Party, Least Control: In GE14, PKR emerged as the largest party in the Pakatan Harapan coalition with 49 parliamentary seats, surpassing DAP (42), BERSATU (13) and AMANAH (11). This numerical advantage was expected to translate into substantive influence over government direction and policy priorities. However, structural asymmetries and elite distrust limited PKR's ability to lead effectively.

Key findings show:

Power Imbalance: Despite its electoral strength, PKR did not control the premiership. Mahathir of BERSATU, with only 13 MPs at the time, was appointed Prime Minister. This created a structural paradox: The dominant party in parliament had no dominance in executive decisions. This power imbalance is also evident in the ministerial composition: PKR held only 7 posts, compared to 6 each from BERSATU and DAP, 5 from AMANAH, 2 from WARISAN, and 1 from LDP. In the first phase on 21 May 2018, 14 ministers were appointed 4 from BERSATU, 4 from DAP, 3 from PKR, and 3 from AMANAH. In the second phase on 2 July 2018, another 13 ministers were sworn in—4 from PKR, 2 each from BERSATU, DAP, AMANAH, WARISAN, and 1 from LDP. Dr Mahathir also rejected PKR's request for one of the four key portfolios — finance, home affairs, defence, or education — during the initial stages of Cabinet formation negotiations.

Tensions with BERSATU and Mahathir: PKR's strategic agenda—focusing on institutional reform and economic equity—was frequently sidelined in favour of Mahathir's cautious, sometimes regressive, governance style. Dr Mahathir was also seen as overly reliant on the Council of Eminent Persons (CEP), chaired by former Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin and comprising former Bank Negara Malaysia Governor Zeti Akhtar Aziz,

former Petronas President Hassan Marican, tycoon Robert Kuok, and economist Dr Jomo Kwame Sundaram, in governing the country, despite the fact that its formation was not aligned with the Federal Constitution, which provides no provision for the appointment of such a council. This created rifts, particularly over the timing and sincerity of Mahathir's promised power transition to Anwar.

Internal Fragmentation: The leadership rivalry between Anwar and Muhammad Azmin Ali (then Deputy President) escalated during this period. Azmin's alignment with Mahathir, especially during the Sheraton Move maneuver, fractured PKR's parliamentary bloc and led to mass defections, undermining coalition cohesion.

Policy Paralysis: Reform initiatives such as the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC), asset declaration mandates and separation of the Attorney General's prosecutorial powers faced with internal delays and bureaucratic pushbacks. PKR leaders, including Nurul Izzah Anwar and Wong Chen, voiced public frustration over the lack of political will within the coalition. The collapse of PH in February 2020—engineered through the Sheraton Move involving defectors from PKR and BERSATU—underscored the fragility of the coalition and PKR's limited ability to assert its ideological core.

Unity Government (2022–2024): Premiership with Trade-Offs

Following a hung parliament in GE15, PKR secured only 31 seats decline from its 2018 performance but sufficient to form the backbone of the Unity Government—Anwar was appointed Prime Minister through a broad coalition that included ideological and historical adversaries such as BN, GPS, GRS and Warisan. This coalition was engineered under the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's guidance to secure parliamentary confidence and national stability.

The following dynamics are observed:

Symbolic Leadership, Strategic Constraints: While Anwar's premiership was a historical milestone, it came with a politically fragmented cabinet where no single block could dictate the reform agenda. PKR's ideological allies were few and many senior positions went to UMNO figures with differing priorities.

Institutional Reform Diluted: Although Anwar repeatedly invoked Malaysia Madani as a vision for inclusive, accountable governance, the pace of institutional reform slowed. Proposals such as revamping the MACC's appointment process or limiting political appointments in GLCs faced resistance, especially from UMNO figures wary of erosion in patronage networks.

Compromise as Governance Logic: Coalition maintenance became the government's primary objective, sometimes at the expense of reform. For example, PKR did not pursue key PH-era reforms like reintroducing local government elections or abolishing the Sedition Act, moves that are likely to antagonize conservative coalition partners.

Internal Stabilisation Efforts: Unlike during PH, internal PKR cohesion improved post-2020. The departure of the Azmin faction led to a consolidation of leadership around Anwar, Mohd Rafizi Ramli and Saifuddin Nasution Ismail. However, this consolidation did not translate into coalition dominance.

Public Perception Gap: Despite PKR controlling the premiership, public perception of reform fatigue began to grow. Several youth-focused studies and opinion polls indicated growing scepticism about Anwar's ability to deliver structural change under a compromise-laden arrangement.

Reformism vs Real Politics

The experience of PKR in government across two separate periods—under PH from 2018 to 2020 and under the Unity Government from 2022 to 2024 illustrates the inherent tension between reformist ideals and pragmatic governance realities. Applying Reform Theory (Boeri et al., 2006), this section examines how PKR attempted, failed or recalibrated its reform strategies according to four classical pathways: Exploiting a parliamentary majority, widening its political base, dividing opposition and leveraging external constraints.

Reform Strategy Under PH: Parliamentary Majority Undermined by Distrust: When PKR entered the federal government in 2018, it did so as the largest party in Parliament (49 seats) and as the symbolic anchor of the Reformasi movement. However, PKR never fully exercised majority power, due to deep inter-party mistrust especially within the Mahathir-led component (BERSATU) and the failure to secure consensus on the transition of power to Anwar.

Key findings include:

Leadership Ambiguity: The delay and ambiguity surrounding the promised handover of the premiership from Mahathir to Anwar eroded PKR's credibility and internal morale. It weakened Anwar's authority and gave space for rival actors, most notably Azmin, to build factional influence within and beyond PKR.

Fragmentation and Defection: Internal leadership crisis culminated in Azmin's defection, along with several MPs, in the 2020 Sheraton Move, which directly caused the fall of the PH government. This revealed PKR's vulnerability to elite betrayal and its failure to construct enforceable elite pacts within the coalition.

Unrealized Reforms: Despite early reform momentum—including the establishment of several parliamentary select committees and the repeal of draconian laws such as the Anti-Fake News Act—more significant structural reforms were obstructed.

These included:

Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC) – stalled due to police resistance and intra-cabinet disagreements.

Separation of powers – the Attorney General and the Public Prosecutor remain in a similar individual, despite public pressure.

GLC appointments – while some reforms occurred, patronage persisted, especially in BERSATU-linked entities.

A fundamental ideological rift emerged between Anwar and Dr Mahathir during the PH administration, particularly over the future of Malaysia's affirmative action policies, stalling most important reform for PKR. From the outset of the PH Government's formation, Anwar stated on 17 May 2018 that affirmative action policies for Malays must be replaced with merit-based policies. He said, "decades-old affirmative action policies for the country's Malay majority must be discarded in favor of a new program to help the poor regardless of race," as "poor Malays will benefit more from merit-based policies that are transparent". He reiterated this on 15 September 2018, stating that "Malaysia's decades-old affirmative action policy is obsolete and should be needs-based rather than race-based", and again on 25 March 2019, asserting that "our economic agenda must be needs-based, not race-based". This contrasted with Dr Mahathir's position where he stated frequently that affirmative action policies for Malays would be maintained to prevent conflict between the Malay and Chinese communities, among others in a BBC HARD talk interview on 2 October 2018.

Reform Strategy Under Unity Government: Widening Base, Narrowing Ideals: In the post-GE15 political configuration, PKR's path to power required building a broad-based Unity Government, incorporating parties with divergent ideologies—UMNO (its traditional adversary), GPS (regionalist Sarawak party), GRS (Sabah coalition) and DAP (a frequent target of Malay-Muslim anxieties).

Base-Widening Strategy: As theorized by Boeri et al., PKR adopted a deliberate strategy of political inclusiveness to stabilize executive power. This ensured parliamentary legitimacy for Anwar's leadership but came at the cost of ideological coherence.

Moderation of Reform Agenda: PKR-led reforms in this phase were tempered to avoid alienating its coalition partners. For example:

Reintroduction of local government elections once a PH goal was shelved indefinitely, due to UMNO and GPS resistance.

Sedition Act and SOSMA harsh colonial-era laws that PKR had long opposed remained in use.

GLC appointments persisted based on political quotas rather than meritocratic reform.

Elite Interviews Confirm Constraint

Interviews with Johari and Ramasamy revealed that coalition management, rather than reforming delivery, was the operative priority in the Unity Government. Both affirmed that many reformists within PKR felt frustrated by the slow pace and dilution of the original Reformasi agenda.

External Constraints: Economy and Ethnopolitical Risk: PKR's reformism was further moderated by external constraints, particularly after 2022:

Economic Recovery Imperatives: Post-pandemic fiscal pressures, inflation and global supply chain disruptions forced the Unity Government to prioritize short-term economic stability over long-term institutional restructuring. Anwar's Malaysia Madani agenda focused on cost-of-living issues, subsidies and investment attractiveness, pushing governance reform down the agenda.

Ethnic Sensitivities Post-GE15: The rise of Perikatan Nasional (PN) whose electoral success was anchored in Malay-majority constituencies created a volatile backdrop. Anwar's government avoided reform moves that could be construed as anti-Malay or anti-Islam, such as revising affirmative action policies or curbing religious authorities' powers.

PKR, in adapting to this pressure, often chose narrative substitution over policy transformation—speaking the language of reform while maintaining many status quo arrangements. This disjuncture is central to understanding why public frustration over the slow pace of reform remained high despite PKR's control of the premiership.

Centripetalism at Work

The centripetal political model, as conceptualized by Benjamin Reilly (2001), emphasizes electoral systems and institutional designs that encourage interethnic cooperation, coalition-building across cleavages and moderation in divided societies. PKR, since its inception, has explicitly embraced this paradigm, positioning itself as Malaysia's

only truly multiracial party committed to transcending the racial and religious silos entrenched in Malaysian politics. But while PKR's ideological commitment to centripetalism remained consistent between 2018 and 2024, the actual policy outcomes and societal shifts it effected were sporadic, reactive and constrained by coalition realities.

PKR's Normative Commitment to Centripetalism: PKR's central pillars Justice, Democracy, and Reform were consistently expressed through:

Multiracial Candidate Selection: In both GE14 and GE15, PKR fielded a diverse slate of candidates across ethnic and religious backgrounds, refusing to pigeonhole its MPs into ethnically homogenous seats.

Inclusive Messaging: PKR leaders, especially Anwar and Rafizi, delivered speeches and manifestos grounded in shared national issues economic inequality, youth employment, education—rather than ethno-religious appeals.

Party Structure: Unlike UMNO, PAS or DAP, which are seen as monoethnic or mono-linguistic entities, PKR maintained a genuinely integrated leadership and grassroots machinery, with Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban and Kadazan leaders sharing strategic portfolios. These normative traits fulfilled the preconditions of centripetalism: Inclusive party organization, cross-ethnic appeal and ideological moderation.

Shortcomings in Translating Centripetalism into Policy

Despite this foundational orientation, the PKR's centripetal ideals are rarely translated into institutionalized outcomes or policy harmonization. Several gaps are documented:

Reactive Ethnic Management: During the PH administration, tensions between Malay conservatives and DAP triggered fears of "Chinese dominance." Rather than pushing forward on ethnic integration policies, PKR leaders often reassured the Malay ground through status quo maintenance (e.g., retaining Article 153 privileges, backing JAKIM's funding).

Symbolic Multiracialism in the Unity Government: Under Anwar's Unity Government, PKR's centripetal narrative persisted through the Malaysia Madani framework, which emphasized unity in diversity. However, policy deliverables were largely non-structural focused more on symbolic gestures (e.g., multiracial cabinet appointments) than substantive integration (e.g., common school system, interethnic economic redistribution).

Silencing Identity Extremes, but Not Reforming Institutions: PKR avoided inflammatory racial rhetoric and often acted as a moderating force, especially when PN or PAS MPs made racially provocative statements in Parliament. Yet, PKR did not initiate reforms to reduce ethnic segmentation in the public sector recruitment, school systems or political funding.

Evidence from Interviews and Party Discourse: Elite interviews in the thesis reinforced this analysis:

Sivamurugan noted that PKR's centripetal vision was electorally appealing in urban, mixed constituencies but faced systemic resistance in rural and state-level apparatuses, where ethnic sentiments dominated bureaucratic culture.

Muhammad Agus acknowledged that PKR functioned as a balancing force but conceded that coalition constraints and fear of electoral backlash prevented it from institutionalising centripetalism beyond rhetoric.

Party congress speeches (2018–2024) reviewed were also revealing: While PKR leaders repeatedly denounced racial politics and affirmed Bangsa Malaysia, no significant policy resolutions were passed to embed this ethos in federal or state governance practices.

Table 1: Partial Success, Structural Limitations

Centripetal Feature	Manifested in PKR?	Institutionalized?
Multiracial Party Structure	✓	✓
Cross-ethnic Coalition Rhetoric	✓	✓
Education Reform (common school system)	✗	✗
Ethnic Quota Rebalancing (e.g., GLCs, scholarships)	✗	✗
Inclusive Welfare Schemes (means-tested, not race-based)	⚠ (partially in <i>Madani Economy</i>)	⚠

To conclude, centripetalism was "present in principle but absent in practice." PKR maintained its ideological consistency on paper but failed to reform the entrenched institutional logics of consociationalism. This highlights the classic centripetal dilemma: Moderation wins rhetorical space, but not necessarily structural transformation, especially when electoral viability and coalition maintenance override ideological consistency.

Interpretation: What Do the Results Tell Us

The comparative findings from PKR's experience in the PH Government (2018–2020) and the Unity Government (2022–2024) reveal a persistent strategic dualism: PKR is ideologically anchored in reformist and multiracial values, yet pragmatically constrained by coalition politics, institutional inertia and Malaysia's deeply embedded political culture.

Reformist Identity vs Governance Constraints: PKR entered government as a party of ideas rooted in the Reformasi movement's call for justice, institutional integrity and inclusivity. However, once in power, the rhetoric

of reform outpaced actual delivery, with many structural proposals (e.g., IPCMC, judicial independence, local elections, separation of prosecutorial powers) either stalled or watered down.

This disconnect can be interpreted as evidence of elite institutional capture and coalition fragility. In the PH era, Mahathir’s dominance, combined with resistance from conservative bureaucratic actors and police elites, prevented PKR from institutionalizing many reformist goals despite electoral legitimacy. In the Unity Government, Anwar held the premiership but faced an ideologically incoherent coalition where reform progress risked destabilizing partners like UMNO and GPS. PKR’s strategic calculus thus shifted towards stability over transformation.

The Sheraton Move betrayal further traumatized the party, teaching its leadership that ideological purism can be exploited in a fluid political system. Hence, PKR’s recent approach has been cautious emphasizing administrative competence and social spending rather than structural upheaval.

Centripetalism: Ideological Consistency, Structural Limitations: Centripetalism theory helps explain this paradox. PKR has consistently avoided ethnocentric appeals, campaigned on universal values and structured itself as a truly multiracial party. However, the centripetal logic assumes an institutional environment that rewards moderation and penalizes ethnic extremism—a condition not fully present in Malaysia’s political landscape. Hence, electoral incentives, media narratives and party financing mechanisms still favor communal mobilization over centripetal appeal. Thus, while PKR retained its identity as a moderate force, the electoral rewards increasingly accrued to more polarizing players such as PAS or BERSATU. This reinforces a central insight: Ideological centrism can lose structural efficacy in a polarized society, especially when voters are fragmented along identity lines and institutions are slow to reform.

Reform Theory in Practice: Missing Preconditions

Reform Theory (Boeri et al. 2006) offers a pragmatic frame to understand why PKR’s reform record appears uneven or cautious. PKR lacked all four strategic advantages typically required for bold reform:

Table 2: Reform Theory in Practice

Reform Pathway	PH Government	Unity Government
Parliamentary Majority	✓ (but no PM control)	✗ (fragmented seat count)
Base-Widening	⚠ (PH expansion efforts limited)	✓ (broadest coalition ever)
Divide-and-Conquer	✗ (internal betrayal)	✗ (unity requires compromise)
External Constraint	⚠ (public demand post-GE14)	✓ (economic crisis post-COVID)

In PH, although there was formal parliamentary strength, there was no elite consensus. Mahathir’s reluctance to transfer power to Anwar and intra-PKR rivalries neutralized parliamentary momentum. In the Unity Government, broad-based coalition strategy (base-widening) helped Anwar ascend but forced PKR into trade-offs. Reform demands were often delayed preserving internal cohesion, particularly with UMNO figures holding key ministries.

Thus, political survival, not transformation, became the dominant strategy, especially after the betrayal of 2020. As one elite interviewee summarized: "You cannot reform if you are fighting for your political life every day."

Political Maturity with a Price: Despite the shortcomings, there are also signs of political maturity within PKR:

- ✓ Improved internal cohesion post-Azmin defection.
- ✓ Stronger institutional memory and narrative discipline, as seen in Rafizi’s technocratic focus and Anwar’s stabilising diplomacy.
- ✓ Strategic framing of reform in moral and economic terms (Malaysia Madani, targeted subsidies), though not always followed by structural reform.

These elements suggest that while PKR has become more adept at navigating Malaysia’s coalition complexity, it has also become less radical in its reformist ambition.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the complex trajectory of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) from its Reformasi origins to its current role in Malaysian governance under two distinct coalition periods: the Pakatan Harapan (2018–2020) and the Unity Government (2022–2024). By employing a qualitative methodology anchored in documentary analysis and elite interviews and drawing upon Centripetalism and Reform Theory as its core frameworks, the research uncovers the intricate interplay between ideological ambition, institutional resistance, and coalition politics. It contributes significantly to the literature on reformist governance, party institutionalization, and coalition dynamics in plural democracies, especially in Southeast Asia.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a fundamental puzzle: Can a party forged in the crucible of resistance translate its reform into meaningful governance outcomes when confronted with the realities of power-sharing, ethnic patronage, and elite contestation? The empirical findings suggest that while PKR made notable efforts to remain

ideologically consistent championing multiracialism, institutional reform, and inclusive governance its actual policy delivery was uneven, frequently obstructed by internal fragmentation and coalition fragility.

One of the clearest insights from this study is the observation that electoral success does not equate to reform capacity. During the Pakatan Harapan era, despite securing the largest number of parliamentary seats among its coalition partners, PKR did not control the premiership. Internal leadership tensions particularly between Anwar Ibrahim and Dr. Mahathir Mohamad undermined attempts to institutionalize reforms. Reforms such as the IPCMC, separation of prosecutorial powers, and legislative empowerment were discussed but stalled. The Sheraton Move of 2020 dramatically underscored the instability of Malaysia's coalition politics and demonstrated how quickly reform agendas can be upended by elite realignment.

In the Unity Government phase (2022–2024), PKR led the coalition under Anwar's premiership but with a smaller seat share. Here, the challenge was not internal fragmentation but ideological incoherence among coalition partners. The inclusion of UMNO, GPS, GRS, and others required careful balancing and diluted PKR's reformist momentum. Key institutional reforms were shelved, and public perceptions of the party's commitment to change began to erode. PKR was forced to moderate its narrative and adopt a survivalist approach, prioritizing coalition stability over rapid transformation.

This dual experience reveals the strategic paradox facing reformist parties in plural and coalition-driven democracies: in seeking to govern, they must often compromise on the very ideals that propelled them to prominence. However, this study resists framing PKR's journey as a betrayal of reform. Instead, it interprets the party's trajectory as a case of ideological adaptation under structural constraint.

A key contribution of this research lies in its rejection of the simplistic idealism–pragmatism dichotomy. PKR's political behavior reflects not a stark departure from its ideals but a strategic negotiation between reformist aspiration and political reality. The party remained committed to a multiracial, centrist platform even when it faced electoral disadvantages, especially among Malay-majority constituencies where ethnic populism proved potent. It continued to advocate for parliamentary and institutional reform, albeit through gradualist and often incremental approaches.

The study applied Centripetalism Theory to assess whether PKR managed to build cross-ethnic alliances, foster multiracial political institutions, and depoliticize ethnic identity in Malaysian governance. The evidence shows that PKR's efforts through inclusive candidate selection, coalition-building, and universalist rhetoric aligned strongly with centripetal ideals. However, Malaysia's entrenched ethno-political structures and voter behavior patterns imposed significant limits. Ethnic-based parties such as UMNO and PAS retained strong influence, especially in rural Malay constituencies, constraining PKR's ability to institutionalize centripetal values.

Reform Theory, particularly Boeri et al.'s four pathways parliamentary majority, base-widening, divide-and-conquer, and exploiting external constraints offered a useful framework for evaluating PKR's strategic behavior. In both governing phases, PKR pursued these strategies with mixed success. The PH government lacked unity and failed to fully utilize its majority. The Unity Government expanded PKR's base but compromised its reform capacity. While external shocks such as the 1MDB scandal and COVID-19 crisis created reform windows, coalition instability and elite resistance often derailed implementation.

In conclusion, PKR's experience from 2018 to 2024 reveals the promise and peril of reformist governance in a divided democracy. The party's performance offers both cautionary tales and hopeful templates affirming that the road from Reformasi to realpolitik is neither straight nor singular, but full of tension, learning, recalibration, and resilience.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the conception, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with Universiti Utara Malaysia's research ethics guidelines.

Data Availability

The qualitative data supporting this study is available on request from the corresponding author.

Abbreviations

PKR: Parti Keadilan Rakyat

PH: Pakatan Harapan

IPCMC: Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission

GLC: Government-Linked Company

BN: Barisan Nasional

UMNO: United Malays National Organization

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