



Malaysia March Elections

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INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian elections in March 2008 perhaps will have no claim on its history, but it will definitely be remembered for the growing frustration and a sense of alienation amongst a significant section of its population vis-à-vis the state. Especially among the Indian minority against the concept of "Ketuanan Melayu" (Malay supremacy), which had driven many of them away from their traditional anchor, Barisan Nasional (National Front), a coalition of race-based dominant Malay party UMNO, Malaysian Chinese Association (MIC) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), to opposition parties like the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which always championed the cause of Malaysia for Malaysians and equality for all, and the Keadilan (Justice) party led by Anwar Ibrahim's wife and the new symbol of opposition.

Those, however, have not affected the assured victory of the Barisan Nasional (BN) through gerrymandering, vote-buying, and its indirect threat that any change in the status quo would upset the racial harmony in the country, thus its hold on the government ever since the country achieved independence in 1957.

I MARCH ELECTIONS OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

The March 8 elections results has opened up both opportunities and challenges - to direct political changes in the coming years in the fault line of Malaysian politics, and for adroit and delicate management of those changes without disturbing stability and order in society. The ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional even while holding

the reins of government by virtue of its majority, suffered a moral defeat of historical proportion not only in the federal parliament through the loss of its two-thirds majority, but more so due to their poor showing in the states where the opposition snatched five out of fourteen states from its rule for the first time in the history of the country. However, BN continues to govern essentially because of its majorities in Sabah and Sarawak, the two outlying states across the South China Sea and where, ironically, race and religion are not such fraught issues as in peninsular Malaysia.

The scale of the setback for the governing coalition of race-based parties raises opportunities for the country to move away from a system that has provided stability but become little more than a patronage machine that has failed to respond adequately to a changing society. Anwar Ibrahim in his characteristic style called this swing "A new dawn for Malaysia. The people have voted decisively for a new era." The results have undoubtedly further dented the image and popularity of the leadership of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, which was already badly hurt due to higher living costs and rising racial tensions in this multiethnic nation, and has obviously impacted on his legitimacy, as evident from the demand for his resignation from certain quarters, including Mahatir Mohammad.

Badawi assumed the office of prime minister in 2003 from the charismatic Mahatir with the promise to fight corruption and change the course of politics in the country by lending a more humane face to his administration as opposed to his predecessor's abrasive and confrontationist style. In the initial stage he did take some measures to fight corruption and made a break from the past policies

of awarding contracts to government cronies, but in the end his style of functioning turned out to be no different from his predecessor, and the government operating its business as usual.

The electorate responded with a show of their diminishing confidence on the ruling coalition, which finished with 62 percent of the federal seats - down considerably from the 90 percent that it held previously. Whereas the BN held 199 of the 219 seats in the earlier parliament, its strength this time is reduced to 137 seats, including eight won uncontested, far less than the two-thirds majority line of 148 seats. Malay voters migrated more to the multiracial but predominantly Malay party of the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and to the main Islamist party. Indians and Chinese deserted coalition parties in hordes.

The loss of its two-thirds majority in the federal parliament which it held continuously for 34 years and bulldozed every decisions of the government down the throat of the people, together with the 5 out of 14 states going to the opposition, will automatically put checks and balances on the functioning of government, and will impinge on the working of centre-state relations. The parliament now is expected to be more assertive vis-à-vis the executive. With 82 Opposition MPs out of the total 222 seats in the Dewan Rakyat, the government will find it hard to bulldoze constitutional amendments through with ease as in the past. Bills now will be subjected to greater scrutiny, more so if the new symbol of opposition, Anwar Ibrahim, who was

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barred to contest elections until April this year, comes back to the parliament at a later date through by-election for a seat vacated by his wife.

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Malaysia's 'unitary character with federal features' is also likely to undergo changes with 'opposition states,' - three heartland states Kedah, Perak and Kelantan along with manufacturing-based states Selangor and Penang - expected to assert themselves in all areas where the Constitution confers on them legislative, executive and financial autonomy. Earlier, it was only Kelantan, which was controlled by PAS and one heard of step-motherly treatment by the Federal government towards the state. But now with four other states, they will mount vigorous campaign for greater decentralization and autonomy, heralding healthier and fair Federal-State relations.

The results also showed a dent in the traditional race-based politics operating in the country ever since its independence. Issues of ruling coalition's use of phantom voters and postal votes, corruption, price-rises, racial discrimination and socio-economic grievances played more important role in the voter's choice for the party than their affiliation and loyalty to their races.

This was reflected in the total rout of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and its long-surviving and corrupt leader, Samy Vellu. The protests by a section of the Indian community under the banner of HINDRAF (Hindu Rights Action Force) that

began with at least 10,000 people gathering in central Kuala Lumpur in mid-November last year to demonstrate against the unfair treatment they endured over the years, was as much against an unsympathetic and discriminatory state dominated by the Malays, as against the opportunistic and inept leadership of the MIC for failing to protect the interests of the community.

Some Chinese politicians and cabinet members suffered the same fate for their inability to take care of the interests of the minority. This is a clear sign that race-based parties can no longer automatically count on the votes of their own community. In a clear sign that UMNO can no longer automatically count on Malay votes, two of Abdullah's former cabinet members lost their parliamentary seats. This has led to new political alignments in the country with the opposition parties like the DAP, PKR and PAS benefiting from this shift. Interestingly the PAS' decision to leave its Islamic state agenda on the back burner, and promise to establish a "Negara kebajikan" (welfare state) together with its fielding of a non-Muslim candidate to capitalise on ethnic minorities' discontent with the current administration, facilitated this political alignment and the increase of its tally both in the parliament and in the states.

Malaysia has quotas that ensure preferential treatment for Malays, the so-called 'bumiputra' (sons of the soil) looking for work or those who want to set up a business. As a result, jobs in the government, educational and service-providing institutions controlled by the government are overwhelmingly dominated by the Malays, pushing other communities to the periphery. Indians were calling for fairer treatment. Education is a key complaint. Their Tamil-speaking schools do not get the same money as other public schools, which automatically lower the level of teaching. The two million Indians in Malaysia are predominantly Hindus who have legitimate grievances about religious discrimination. Hindu temples have been torn down to make way for new buildings without proper consultation.

There are increasing instances of Muslim organizations forcing Muslim burial for Hindu dead bodies on the presumed ground of their being converted to Islam before their death, even

though strongly contradicted by their families. In 2000, *Time Asia* reported that Indians have the lowest share of the nation's corporate wealth: 1.5%, compared to 19.4% for the Malays and 38.5% for the Chinese. The highest rate of suicide of any community is among Indians. Gangsterism and violent crime is largely associated with Indians. In 1994, 128 of the 377 murders committed in Malaysia were by Indians. Some 15% of Indians in the capital are squatters.

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In 2003, Indians comprised, according to the *Economist*, "14 percent of juvenile delinquents, 20 percent of (Malaysia's) wife and child (abusers) and 14 percent of its beggars. Among the successful university applicants, Indians constitute less than 5 percent and that too in subjects less attractive to the Malays. There are frequent reports of abuse of Indian workers and Bumiputra politics disadvantaging Indians in education and work opportunities before Malays. An Indian Malaysian can find it difficult to become a doctor or lawyer in Malaysia. Local university seats and scholarships are all awarded under a racial quota system. Even after getting a degree, many say that discrimination is commonplace. Indian doctors, for instance, complain that they are often excluded from lists of approved doctors whom civil servants or company employees can patronise.

II THE ROAD AHEAD INTERNET & GLOBALIZATION

Above all, the results have shown the power of the Internet and of SMS in the dissemination of alternative sources of information, which neutralized ruling party's overwhelming control over the conventional media. The defeat of the Malaysian Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin -

dubbed the "misinformation" minister by the opposition in his parliamentary seat in Kedah, and victory of the popular critical blogger Jeff Ooi in the Jelutong parliamentary seat with a DAP ticket, is a great testimony of the power of internet and the modern information technology. While the government had used the traditional media to portray a rosy picture of Malaysia's economic miracle, respected by the world and moving toward developed country status under visionary BN rule, web portals and blogs like Ooi's, however, have exposed Malaysians to the darker and dysfunctional side of the governance in the country.

The opposition triumph carries within it dangers as well. Stung by defeat, UMNO might try to recover the lost ground among the Malay voters by appealing to baser race and religious instincts in order to neutralize the appeals of PAS and PKR. If that happened Malaysian politics could become even more racially polarized, exposing the traditional ideological divides among the three opposition parties, which temporarily have managed to forge a coalition vis-à-vis the ruling combine, but can come unstuck any moment once the chips are down.

Globalization has brought new compulsions to be competitive to derive benefits from the process. Malaysia's affirmative action programme for the bumiputra alone was possibly needed to bring the backward and rural Malay community at par with the minority Chinese and Indians, one dominating the business and the other bureaucracy. But the continuance of such affirmative action only for one community on the basis of race in perpetuity, rather than on economic criteria, has not only lent high premium on mediocrity at the expense of excellence, but has alienated the minority Chinese and Indians, particularly the latter, a significant section of whom became the most disadvantaged.

This anomaly undoubtedly impinges on Malaysia's ability to excel in areas that require merit to remain competitive in the global market. Time has come for Malaysia to scrap the race rules and devise policies that benefits all disadvantaged irrespective of their races. If Anwar can take advantage of the results of the elections and

articulate further a vision of justice for all in the coming years, he alone can appeal to his Malay voters to change the rules of the game of Malaysian politics. Even if he can achieve partial success in this venture, he will go down as a real reformer and a renaissance man in Malaysian history.

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