

Malaysia's new politics

National Front rule in jeopardy?

By REGISTERING A resounding repudiation of the recent policies and record of Malaysia's government, the results of elections to its federal and state parliaments on 8 March surprised observers of the country's politics. The Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front) coalition, which has governed since independence in 1957, retained control of the federal government. But the opposition took an unprecedentedly large number of parliamentary seats and denied the BN a two-thirds parliamentary majority. In addition, the opposition ousted four BN state governments, bringing the number it controls to five out of 13. Though differences among the three opposition parties remain significant, it seems possible that under the charismatic leadership of once-disgraced former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim they might forge a powerful alliance capable of ousting the BN from power. The regional, as well as domestic, implications of such a regime change could be profound.

UMNO's dominant period

Since 1957, ethnic issues have dominated Malaysian politics. British colonial rule had encouraged large-scale Chinese and Indian immigration, which contributed to the social and economic deprivation of the Malays, the Muslim indigenous population. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the most important component of the BN coalition, has always emphasised Malay advancement as its priority. But because of the size and political weight of the minority populations, it has needed to govern in close collaboration with parties representing Chinese and Indian community interests. In 1969, major electoral gains by 'non-communal' parties appeared to threaten Malay interests

once again, provoking violence (mainly perpetrated by Malays) which killed several hundred people, mainly Chinese-Malaysians. The government imposed a state of emergency and effectively suspended democracy. Though parliamentary rule was restored in 1971, a considerable degree of authoritarianism, justified as necessary to maintain inter-ethnic peace, has characterised the BN's political style.

The most important long-term outcome of the 1969 riots was the New Economic Policy (NEP), which included an affirmative-action programme intended to increase the stake of so-called *bumiputra* ('son of the soil') Malaysians in the economy. Though the NEP expired in 1991, the successor National Development Policy maintained many of its goals. The state has also given social advantages to *bumiputra* citizens, particularly through much-enhanced educational opportunities. While the *bumiputra* designation includes non-Malay indigenous communities, notably groups like the Iban and Kadazan from the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah, these policies have mainly benefited Malays, creating a substantial urban Malay middle class. The attractiveness of its policies to Malays and this community's increasing size relative to the minority groups (due to a higher birth-rate and to non-Malays' emigration) combined to reinforce UMNO's stature as the natural party of government. Nevertheless, despite the BN's ability to secure a two-thirds parliamentary majority (which allowed it to change the constitution if it wished) in every general election between 1974 and 2004, significant political opposition persisted.

In rural peninsular Malaysia, and particularly the relatively poor northeast, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS, Islamic

Party of Malaysia) has constituted a major opposition force since 1977 when it split from the BN. Though ostensibly non-racial, its main support base lies among Malays who would like to see Islamic values implanted more firmly in the constitution and daily life. Though it failed to make significant impact at the federal level until the 2008 elections, PAS has controlled the Kelantan state government since 1990, and the wider challenge that it poses has contributed to UMNO adopting an increasingly Islamist posture itself. Among ethnic Chinese and Indians, the main opposition force has been the liberal and avowedly 'non-communal' Democratic Action Party (DAP).

Mahathir Mohamad, an outspoken and charismatic Malay nationalist, dominated Malaysia's politics and oversaw the country's economic transformation as prime minister between 1981 and 2003. However, his robust style made enemies abroad and at home. Temperamental relations with Singapore, as well as with the United States, Britain and Australia, characterised his leadership. At home, there were disputes with the judiciary and traditional rulers. In 1995, Mahathir announced that Anwar Ibrahim, a former Islamic youth leader and political detainee who had joined UMNO and risen to become deputy prime minister and finance minister, would shortly succeed him. However, personal and policy differences soon undermined relations between the two men. In 1998, Anwar was dismissed from his government posts, detained under the Internal Security Act, beaten up by the national police chief, and in 1999–2000 convicted on corruption and sexual charges, and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. One result of Anwar's detention was the formation of a new opposition grouping, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, National Justice Party), led by his wife, Wan Azizah Ismail. Anwar was released in 2004 after a conviction for sodomy was overturned on appeal, but was disqualified from holding political office until April 2008.



Growing discontent

Malaysians broadly welcomed the accession of Abdullah Badawi as prime minister in succession to Mahathir in 2003. Along with faster economic growth, a 'feel-good factor' associated with the new prime minister – widely seen as an incorruptible and moderate leader combining religious piety with tolerance – helped the BN coalition to a resounding victory in the March 2004 elections, with the opposition taking the lowest number of seats since the 1970s. The BN regained control of Terengganu state, which it had lost to PAS in 1999. There was optimism that Abdullah's administration would deal effectively with the corruption and crime that increasingly plagued Malaysia.

Compared with the Mahathir era, regional and international interlocutors found Malaysia much easier to deal with under Abdullah, who largely muted the government's previous nationalist and anti-Western rhetoric. Malaysia has welcomed involvement from Singapore's government and companies in the Iskandar Development Region in southern Johor state, planned as an important catalyst for economic growth. However, Malaysians have increasingly registered disappointment with Abdullah's administration, which has made little progress towards reducing corruption and crime. While there had always been considerable opposition among the non-Malay communities and poor rural Malays to the BN's rule, there was now also growing discontent among Malays more generally. There was particular unhappiness that the government apparently tolerated the further entrenchment of privilege among a small elite of affluent Malays connected to ruling circles, and discomfort with the prominent political role of Abdullah's son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin (deputy chief of UMNO's youth wing). While 'race' remained a key issue, there was a growing sense that inequality within the Malay community was also important.

In November 2007, two anti-government demonstrations unnerved Abdullah's administration. On 10 November, as many as 40,000 people joined a rally in Kuala Lumpur supported by opposition parties and organised by BERSIH, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, with the aim of submitting to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King) a petition listing specific demands relating to electoral reform. The authorities' reaction was heavy handed, as it was when police later broke up a demonstration by tens of thousands of ethnic Indian Malaysians led by the

Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), a coalition of 30 non-governmental organisations, galvanised by concern over the demolition of Hindu temples and the perceived imposition of sharia-based law. The police arrested HINDRAF leaders after the rally, and detained five under the Internal Security Act. The demonstration highlighted the inability of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) party to protect ethnic Indian interests through its role in the BN.

Elections change political

landscape

These events provided a livelier-than-usual backdrop to the announcement in mid February that the next general election would be held on 8 March, a year earlier than necessary. The government evidently wished to seek a renewed popular mandate before Anwar Ibrahim was allowed to return to politics in April 2008. Another reason may have been an expectation that the looming US recession would impact negatively on Malaysia's economy.

The opposition parties set their sights on removing the BN's two-thirds majority in the federal parliament and retaking Terengganu state. In the event, the extent of the BN losses caused widespread surprise. The three opposition parties – DAP, PAS and PKR – agreed to avoid contesting the same seats and presented themselves as the Barisan Rakyat (People's Front), with Anwar playing the role of leader although not allowed to stand for parliament. Alongside widespread disillusionment with the BN and the blossoming of online newspapers and blogs – a vibrant and critical alternative to stodgy pro-government newspapers and TV channels – the opposition's strategy brought stunning success. It was clear that a desire to punish the BN was now more important than inter-communal distrust, with significant numbers of Malays voting for the 'Chinese' DAP, and Chinese similarly voting for the 'Malay' PAS.

In the federal parliament, the three main opposition parties took 47% of the vote, compared with the BN's 50%: only in 1969 did the opposition take a greater proportion. No less than 82 seats, 37% of the total 222, were won by the opposition, by far the largest number since independence. Among those who lost their seats were several BN ministers, including Samy Vellu, leader of the discredited MIC, and Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, deputy leader of UMNO's women's wing, who was defeated by Anwar's daughter. At the state level, the

BN was shocked to lose control of four states in the densely populated west of the peninsula: Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor. Though the opposition failed to win Terengganu, PAS strengthened its hold on Kelantan.

The election results set the scene for future political turmoil. There have been calls for Abdullah to step aside as leader of UMNO (and, therefore, the government), with a fierce contest to succeed him in prospect in party elections due in August. Unless he decides to step aside and support his anointed successor, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Najib Tun Razak, he may face a challenge from the veteran Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who has indicated his readiness to enter the leadership contest.

Failure to respond to the message from the electorate could prove disastrous for UMNO and the BN. The opposition needs only 30 more seats to replace the BN. There is talk of potential defections to the opposition, particularly from the BN's historically fickle component parties in Sabah and Sarawak. On the other hand, following the opposition victories at state level, there have been disagreements over the allocation of chief ministers' posts, and it is unclear how successfully opposition parties will be able to reconcile their policy positions. There seems little doubt, though, that they will now seek to tighten their alliance, almost certainly under the leadership of Anwar, who expects to enter parliament following a by-election in his wife's seat in April. The new DAP-led government in Penang has already spoken of dismantling *bumiputera* policies. Political instability seems inevitable, though the trans-ethnic character of support for the Barisan Rakyat suggests that communal disturbances could be avoided.

The enlivening of Malaysia's democracy will have important regional ramifications, notably by strengthening political pluralism within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. There may be particular implications for neighbouring Singapore: though the two countries' political circumstances are different, they remain closely linked in social terms. The Malaysian electorate's impulse to vote for the opposition could prove contagious, particularly if the Malaysian case demonstrates that vibrant politics does not spell economic disaster. If Malaysia ultimately thrives under a more meritocratic system, the way would be open for closer collaboration with Singapore. In the immediate future, however, Singapore will be wary of the potential for Malaysian political