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Malaysia's Election and Najib's Challenged Mandate

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Malaysia held its most competitive national polls in May, with the 56-year old incumbent coalition managing to hold onto power. The Barisan Nasional coalition led by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak won 133 or 60 percent of the seats, although it captured only 47 percent of the popular vote. The results, conduct of the polls and aftermath have raised questions about Najib's maiden mandate as ironically he has emerged weaker out of the contest than before he went into it.

Bridget Welsh, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Singapore Management University, explains that “Najib now faces multiple challenges, from electoral legitimacy and inclusive national representation across ethnic communities and classes, to building confidence in political institutions and engaging a more demanding citizen.”

The reasons for Najib's challenged mandate stem from the election itself and the broader changes taking place in Malaysian politics. Foremost, there are concerns about Najib's electoral legitimacy which are two-fold. There is a discrepancy between the popular vote and the results. A gap between results and popular support is common in electoral systems of proportional representation or mixed systems, but in Malaysia's first-past-the-post system the advantage should have been given to the winner of the most votes. This discrepancy has shed light on some of the systemic factors in Malaysia that create an uneven playing field in elections, including malapportionment, gerrymandering, unexplained voter transfers, mainstream media bias and, importantly, the excessive use of state resources for campaigning and vote-buying. This election was one of the most expensive in history, largely through the link between political power and incumbency.

The second concern involves the conduct of the polls itself. On the day of the election there were credible reports of blackouts during the counting process, ballot box mishandling, unexplained missing ballots and foreigners casting ballots. The Election Commission reports directly to the prime minister, failing the basic international standard of impartiality. The debate is not over whether irregularities occurred—as both sides acknowledge problems given the record number of electoral petitions filed—but whether these factors affected the outcome. Najib emerged out of the polls with many questioning whether he is Malaysia's legitimate leader. The opposition-led “Black 505” rallies, with thousands attending regularly from all walks of life, showcase the persistence of an electoral legitimacy deficit.

Najib's challenged mandate has also come in the form of a rupture in the multi-ethnic power-sharing coalition that has governed the country since independence. The Barisan Nasional as a multi-ethnic coalition is effectively dead, as it no longer viably represents non-Malays, especially Chinese Malaysians who comprise over a quarter of the population. Malaysia has long been touted as a successful example of multi-ethnic governance, with elite cooperation assuring representation of the different interests along ethnic lines. Here too there are fundamental shifts. The Chinese-based component parties within the coalition were decimated, so much so that they no longer feel it is appropriate to be part of the cabinet. This has meant that Najib has had to seek out Chinese representation largely from East Malaysia and the post-election cabinet has a record low in representation. At the same time as effectively excluding Chinese Malaysians, Najib blamed the results on a

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“Chinese tsunami,” further alienating the community and showcasing the limits of multi-ethnic representation in his government.

This general election—GE13—also illustrated the shifts in political identities of Malaysians, as race was less of a factor in voting, especially among non-Malays. Voting occurred across ethnic lines, as more Malaysians thought of themselves as Malaysians rather than their ethnic community. GE13 on one level revealed contestation between the old racial political formula with a new non-racialist citizenship. Najib now has to contend with these different perceptions of race in national politics, one entrenched in his own party’s Malay chauvinism and another with a more inclusive model of representation. By reinforcing race-based politics in his post-election rhetoric and cabinet appointments, he faces a challenge of engaging those who are embracing a different non-racialized model of politics.

The results of the polls also point to another challenge: the majority of Najib’s support comes from the lower classes or those dependent on government distribution whereas the majority of the middle class voted for the opposition, across races. Overall, Malaysians who were more educated, informed and economically independent opted for change, while those more dependent on the system voted for consistency. Najib here faces two intertwined issues. First, he has to win over the middle class to carry out policies and it is this cohort, concentrated in the urban areas, which are essential for governance. The lack of middle class support for Najib ensures he has an uphill battle in front of him.

The support of the lower classes will also come with costs, specifically expectations of a continuation of more financial handouts. Already Malaysia broke records with populist initiatives from free dinners to direct cash transfers. This dependence on government distribution will constrain any substantive economic reform. A major transformation during Najib’s tenure has been to increase short-term handouts rather than develop a more coherent long-term development strategy to address the rising economic inequalities and create jobs.

Malaysia’s weakening political institutions is yet another challenge in the wake of GE13. The polls brought to the fore the collusion among government agencies and the incumbent coalition, as state resources were used in the campaign in an unprecedented manner and standards of professionalism were dismissed in favor of incumbent interests. From the Election Commission to the National Registration Department questions are being asked about where the line between the government and partisanship should be drawn. The credibility of the police in particular has come under scrutiny after the political crackdowns and shocking number of deaths in custody. By politicizing government agencies, Najib has weakened the capacity for inclusive governance, particularly given that he was not supported by the majority of Malaysians.

Malaysian citizens are increasingly beginning to question their leaders and their performance. When the government engaged in a series of post-election political crackdowns against student activists, bloggers and opposition members, the response was to increase protests. Both Najib and the opposition face a more politically mobilized electorate with higher expectations, and more critical outlooks fueled by political skepticism. Citizens are willing to address issues without waiting for political elites to act; post-GE13 more Malaysians are moving out of the electoral process to effect political change. Politics has become an everyday phenomenon, in which leaders are expected to provide sound national leadership to move the country forward.

Najib now faces multiple challenges, from electoral legitimacy and inclusive national representation across ethnic communities and classes, to building confidence in political institutions and engaging a more demanding citizen. He now has to secure his position as the leader of his own party. His position is not one of strength after this election. His leadership skills will be tested as never before, with the chances of substantive reform even more remote than ever.

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