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ANALYSIS

MALAYSIA'S 12TH GENERAL ELECTION: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE OPPOSITION'S SURGE

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Malaysia's twelfth general election, held March 8, 2008, resulted in an unprecedented setback for the ruling National Front (BN) coalition. In 2004, the 14-party BN won 90 percent of parliamentary seats—298 to the combined opposition's 21—and control of all states except Kelantan. This time, its support slipping among all ethnic communities, the BN lost its majority in five of 12 state legislatures under contest, while its share of seats in the federal parliament declined from 91 percent to 63 percent. Anything less than a two-thirds majority in parliament is considered a debacle, not least since it complicates amending the constitution, as has been done over 40 times since 1957. That firewall has not been breached since the ill-fated polls of 1969, which gave way to ethnic violence and the suspension of parliamentary government. And never before have so many state legislatures switched hands. While even PM Abdullah Ahmad Badawi conceded from the outset that he did not expect a reprise of the BN's previous strong showing, the extent of the opposition's advance was unexpected even by the parties themselves. Although the long-term implications of the results are unclear, at least on the federal level, the opposition—chiefly the National Justice Party (PKJ), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)—will now have a chance to put its ideas into practice, from forging a workable coalition to cleaning up state politics. Perhaps more importantly, these results suggest the possibility of a less communal political order.

WHOSE VOTES CHANGED AND WHY?

The polls followed closely on massive protests both by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) and the Coalition for Free & Fair Elections (Bersih), and at a time when a combination of lagging economic indicators, rising inflation and inequality, ethnic and religious tensions, endemic violent crime, plunging academic standards, and a host of corruption charges and other scandals left Abdullah's government unpopular across communities, but especially in urban areas and traditional PAS strongholds. Indian support for the BN fell from 82 to an estimated 47 percent. The coalition's primary Indian component, the Malaysian Indian Congress, was routed; all its top leaders lost their seats. Chinese support similarly plunged, from 65 to 35 percent. The DAP won more seats than BN's Malaysian Chinese Association and Chinese-based Gerakan combined. Malay support slipped much less, just 5 percent from the 63 percent of 2004. Nearly 40 percent of the BN's parliamentary seats are from the non-peninsular states of Sabah and Sarawak; those two states plus Johor, traditionally a stronghold of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the leading party in the BN, together account for over half the coalition's seats.

Islam was less an issue this time than in the past; even PAS spoke more of a welfare state than an Islamic one. Perhaps most importantly, while the BN coasted to victory in 2004 on high hopes that Abdullah would sweep away corruption and soothe communal fears, his failure in both regards left him and his party vulnerable. The opposition parties, for their part, benefited

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both from their promises of change and from their vocal support for minority economic, cultural, and religious rights, including the reworking of affirmative action policies to be based on need rather than race. Notably, younger and first-time opposition candidates performed especially well, including many with a background in civil society, academia, or alternative media.

A changed media landscape also worked to the opposition's advantage. The mainstream media—both print and electronic—were biased, as usual, in coverage of campaign events and candidates, ratcheting up their dire warnings as the polls drew closer. Internet media, blogs, and broadcasts played a more pivotal role than ever before, offering everything from news, to comedic sketches on YouTube, to new revenue streams through online donations. The BN was far less effective than its challengers at making use of these new channels. International media, too, were out in force and generally sympathetic to the opposition, from European and American newswires to newcomer Al Jazeera. Mainstream media coverage, suggests one analyst, may actually have worked against the BN: voters seeking merely to register a protest vote had no sense of the scope of the upsurge and how much that vote counted.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT NOW?

The big question is what will happen next and over the longer-term. Abdullah has been sworn in again as PM, despite pressure even from within UMNO for him to resign. The markets are wary following a 10 percent drop in the Kuala Lumpur Composite Index (KLCI) on the first post-election trading day, but all parties have asserted their receptivity to investment and curbs on corruption, so these jitters are expected to be short-term. Worries and rumors about potential racial outbursts by wounded BN supporters came to naught. Overall, the BN seems to be taking the results in stride, apart from some rumored attempts to lure opposition MPs to jump ship.

Both BN and opposition state governments are quickly taking shape—and they do have real authority and responsibilities, including jurisdiction over land allocation, local services, and Islamic law. Of the opposition parties, only PAS has ever held power. All the opposition parties, too, have called for reinstatement of local party elections, at least in the states they control; Selangor and Penang, as well as Kuala Lumpur (a federal territory rather than a state), are likely to be first off the mark.

Four areas in particular merit watching. First, the DAP, PKR, and PAS intend to govern as a coalition in those states they jointly control. The DAP and PAS have never been able to sustain collaboration in the past; PAS's usual Islamizing agenda is anathema to the largely-Chinese, secular DAP. How far PAS will press that agenda, how much DAP supporters will trust party leadership for consorting with PAS, and whether the three parties will be able to share power and work through their differences without undermining their respective bases and agendas remains to be seen. Within a week of the polls, the fragile balance is already starting to totter.

Second, while the elections were about issues, those issues were not the same for all parties and places—and the BN still holds a strong majority in Parliament. Many of those who swung toward the opposition this time are likely to swing back again next time if desired changes are not forthcoming or if economic conditions worsen further. Moreover, the BN may find ways of withholding funds from opposition-controlled states, as it has done for PAS-controlled states in the past, making it all the more difficult for those governments to pursue any sort of agenda.

Third, while the accession of civil society activists to party office brings new ideas and commitment, it also destabilizes an already shaky system of checks and balances. It remains to be seen how much partisanship comes to color the programs and perspectives of the organizations from which those activists hail, and how well civil society will replace the expertise and monitoring capacity it has lost. These concerns are especially keen since the most critical of civil society organizations are clustered in territories now in opposition hands: Selangor, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur.

Lastly, there is the matter of ex-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's fate. Though the extent of his influence was initially uncertain, Anwar played a pivotal role in rallying opposition unity and cross-racial support for opposition candidates. Rattled by his clout, the BN lashed out ever more aggressively, lambasting Anwar as an untrustworthy "chameleon." Anwar suggested before the polls that after a month—by which time his four years of ineligibility following a sentence for abuse of power would be over—a PKR MP would step down, allowing him to return to office in a by-election. In that case, and if the opposition meets voters' expectations, the charismatic but controversial Anwar's political future could be bright.

The opposition parties, for their part, benefited both from their promises of change and from their vocal support for minority economic, cultural, and religious rights, including the reworking of affirmative action policies to be based on need rather than race.