



Viewpoints contain background analyses and comments on critical global and regional trends, issues and developments. *Viewpoints* also occasionally include analytical reviews of ISEAS books. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of ISEAS.

A sea change in M'sian politics

By K KESAVAPANY

Business Times

10 Mar 2008

IN A confounding repudiation of conservative pundits who had predicted otherwise, Malaysia's ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), has failed to secure a two-thirds majority in the country's 12th general election.

Although the BN's simple majority enables it to form the next federal government, its loss of the two-thirds majority portends fundamental changes in the way in which it has managed the political system.

The ruling coalition can no longer push through its policies and programmes in Parliament by itself, but will have to accommodate the Opposition and proceed through compromise. The government will have to take into account the Opposition's calls for better governance, greater transparency and stricter adherence to the rule of law in the political process. On the economic front, accommodation will mean that the government will have to take seriously opposition calls for fairness in the distribution of the economic cake. On the social front, the ruling coalition will have to pay attention to the minorities' complaints of discrimination in the areas of race and religion.

In the immediate future, the BN will have to rectify a mistake in its campaign strategy, which was to have focused on development in the macro sense. While Malaysians do want development, they responded to the Opposition's emphasis on mundane but real issues such as the rising cost of living and increasing crime.

The elections represent a monumental achievement for the Opposition. The BN's inability to wrest back Kelantan was not unexpected, given the extent to which the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) is entrenched in that state. However, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) has succeeded at last in realising its long-term goal of taking over Penang; and the BN has astonishingly lost Kedah, the home state of former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, Perak and Selangor.

Two consequences follow from these results. First, the ruling coalition will have to pay close attention to the management of centre-state relations because the old formula, of the BN being in control of both the federal government and an overwhelming number of state governments, is no longer the case.

Secondly, and more importantly in the long term, this development points to a fundamental possibility of change in Malaysian politics. The results show that a sizeable number of Malays in Kedah, Perak and Selangor, who were disenchanted with the BN's record of performance, have put that dissatisfaction ahead of racial considerations and made common cause with Chinese and Indians in voting for the Opposition. Should the BN read this development correctly, it might lead to a less race-based polity.

The Opposition, too, has work to do. The overarching question is where Anwar Ibrahim fits into the emerging scenario. Come April, he will be eligible to contest an election. Should he make it into Parliament, he would be able to coalesce the opposition forces and would be in a position to present an alternative to the BN. This is a prospect that Malaysia has never faced.

For the time being, the Opposition will have to consolidate its gains. That means allocating portfolios concomitant with each party's contribution to the overall success.

Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi will have to inject fresh blood into the ruling coalition to make up for the loss of four heavyweight ministers. The near-complete rout of Gerakan and the heavy losses suffered by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), including the defeat of its president, Samy Vellu, reiterate the need for fresh and bold approaches to Cabinet formation.

For the international community, what is reassuring is that Malaysia has gone through this political sea change without its social system coming under undue stress. Kuala Lumpur should continue to be able to discharge its regional and international obligations. What is unclear is whether the election results will affect Malaysia's economic and investment climate. Well-wishers of Malaysia will hope not.

The writer, director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, is former Singapore high commissioner to Malaysia. These are his personal views