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Malaysia's political terrain tilts beyond recognition

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Malaysia has formally been a democracy from Day One.

However, the country's journey as a sovereign nation from 31 August 1957, when it gained independence from Great Britain, until today, is a complicated one.

After its twelfth general elections on 8 March this year, that story has gained a new poignancy. Up till that point, Malaysia's tale was the familiar one about a new nation formed in the aftermath of colonialism sliding away from its democratic beginnings towards authoritarianism and "guided democracy". Compromise upon compromise were made along the way, but the limits put into place, often for security reasons and for the purpose of maintaining stability in the country, grew and grew. They were never taken away after the situation changed. The ending seemed inevitable. Civil liberties were giving way to the dictates of centralised power.

On that fateful day, the opposition – against all odds – managed to win control over five of 13 states in the federation and denied Barisan Nasional (BN), the coalition that had been ruling the country since independence the two-third majority that it had come to consider as its god-given right.

The big worry until then was that the country had come so far down the road towards total dominance by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) that the whims and fancies as well as the culture of corruption and the politics of fear of that party would decide Malaysia's future for good.

Things did not look bright. Indeed, it looked as if the country had already skidded onto the slippery slope away from democracy, and no reliable force was in sight which could stop the slide.

But then, overnight, things changed. The tale took a turning no one expected. Some call it a tsunami that overturned the old order. But I prefer calling it an earthquake.

This is for two reasons. Firstly, not everything was swept away, meaning that the old order is still around and it will fight back. Secondly, more than being drenched for a moment, the country's political terrain shifted. The lay of the land has changed. The slippery slope has reversed its gradient after the elections, and may actually be leaning the other way now, towards more democracy, towards a renewed respect for the rule of law, towards a revival of effective parliamentarism, and towards a concept of justice fleeced of racialist suppositions.

For months and years to come, Malaysians will have endless debates about who did what thing right or wrong, and which event led to what result. Things did come to a head in a very real sense. The deteriorating standard of governance certainly had something to do with it, as did the arrogance and nonchalance of the powerful. The mutiny of the marginalised Tamil community definitely played a vital role.

More generally, the fiftieth anniversary of independence, celebrated with little joy or pride, definitely egged the populace on to contemplate the situation the country found itself in. Belief in the future declined, and faith in the administration staking out that future was broken.

The politics of fear – where UMNO warned non-Malays that violence was imminent if the Malays purportedly represented by that party lost power, and where non-Malay parties in the ruling coalition cautioned that the non-Malays would be unrepresented in the government and Islamism would take over if they voted for the opposition – was shown to be an outdated bogeyman left over from the country's troubled childhood.

All that was needed was for voters to actually dare to vote with hope, and not in fear. A leap was faith was taken. And things ended up looking better than voters had dared to hope.

The powers-that-be did not totally fall, which might have caused more chaos than necessary; those same powers lost the total dominance over parliament and the country's political life that they had enjoyed since independence; the three-party opposition alliance took five of 13 states and cut across the racial divides to render racial unrest improbable; the opposition gained control over the industrialised northwestern states to make themselves undeniable to the economic planning of the federal government, and; the country now has a chance to grow as a federation through the oneupmanship that the states being ruled by different parties will engage in from now on.

Being the government in the states they now control, the opposition parties will be forced to undergo a period of re-education in order to turn themselves into a mature and responsible parliamentary opposition. The culture they had developed through the condition of being “the eternal opposition” has to be reformed.

Thorough reformation is also something that all the members of the ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional, will have to go through. Dealing with a worthy opposition in ways called for in a parliamentary democracy is something they are not used to doing.

The biggest change in Malaysia – and it is a change that will last – is the regaining of faith by the populace in the power of the ballot box. It was not for no reason that the cry of the twelve general elections was “Makkal Sakti”, the Tamil phrase for “People Power”.

Perhaps now, Malaysia can get down to the part of nation building that is about citizenship rights, respect for the individual, and the enjoyment of cultural diversity. This seemed to have been beyond it in the last five decades, but seems very possible now. Here is where the country can rightfully appear as encouragement for developing nations to shift their political paradigm through the ballot box without precipitating violence along the way.

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