

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S *INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES* SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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Malaysia's BN Stays in Power, But Deep Changes Have Nevertheless Occurred

By Ooi Kee Beng

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The only change in government following Malaysia's 13th General Elections was in the state of Kedah. Nevertheless, some fundamentals in the country's political structure were altered for good, and these are best understood through a historical perspective.
- All the political parties in Malaysia formed before independence and which are still relevant, are communal parties.
- Be that as it may, three inter-related dimensions have always formed the backdrop for Malaysian political discourses—ethnocentrism, multiracialism and socialism. Since the 1980s, Islam as a parameter for political mobilization has also become significant, and is best understood within the country's general inter-ethnic balancing act.
- The history of UMNO and its allies has been one of internal conflicts despite the discourse on communal unity. Nevertheless, its dominance continues to rise within the ruling coalition, at the cost of other major member parties.
- The latest split, which occurred in 1998, saw Anwar Ibrahim becoming the major opposition leader, and greatly configured Malaysian politics for the following 15 years. This also ignited a revival of social activism, especially after 2007.
- The transition from the Mahathir period after 2003 compounded the political equation further. Abdullah Badawi's attempts failed badly. With Najib taking power in 2009, a four-year period of *de facto* campaigning began, which polarized the country further.
- Najib's next challenge is to survive the UMNO party elections later this year, which he is likely to do.
- The huge mal-apportionment in constituency size which made BN's victory possible, will be a major issue. Policy competition between the two coalitions which began in 2008 will continue.

HISTORICAL LINES OF CONFLICT

The 13th General Elections held on May 5th this year did not bring about the change in government at the federal level which the opposition had hoped for. The only change in government to occur was in fact in Kedah, where the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) lost the second of the five states that it had won on March 8, 2008.

However, despite such disappointments, the PR as a whole continued making inroads into new key areas that were once off-limits to the opposition. The despondence that overwhelmed the coalition and its supporters as the officially announced results began going against them ran deep, which in a way explains the psychological need for the subsequent giant rallies held throughout the peninsula to manifest a general distrust of the electoral process. For leaders of the opposition, the growing sense of political empowerment among voters had to be rescued from turning into self-doubt and pessimism; and so a show of unity and of widespread conviction *after* the results seemed necessary for their struggle to maintain impetus.

Be that as it may, the elections, though not the watershed that PR had hoped they would be, were certainly revealing in many essential ways of where the country finds itself today.

It has now been almost fifty years since Malaysia came into being and 55 years since Malaya became independent. It has also been over sixty years since the Alliance model came into being and allowed the country's different races to interact politically, though in a very cautious fashion.

At this time then, what kind of periodization will provide us with a functional understanding of the elections and the dynamics surrounding them? The length of the Barisan Nasional's control over the federal government at one extreme or the short period since the phenomenal rise of the PR at the other? Or is something in between more relevant? To varying degrees, these are all illuminating in different ways, and perhaps switching perspectives is the best way to go about probing the country's present situation.

One point to note is that political parties formed before Independence and who still survive today are all communally based ones. Such was the consciousness of those times, and such was the basis for tensions in those days—the British ruling over a hotchpotch population geared towards supplying the imperial economy; a string of sultanates of varying stature organised to keep the British secure at the top; labour immigration enhanced by colonial needs; the Japanese ruling over British colonies deserted by their masters; and then, the insurgency by the Malayan Communist Party to top it all off.

And so we have among parties formed in the 1940s: the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) conceived in irate reaction to ill-advised British attempts to simplify their control over the peninsula; the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA),

crafted to mirror the Malay-centrism of UMNO; and the Malayan Indian Congress, created to duplicate the independence movement in India.

The scope of inter-party struggle in those days, apart from the communal one, were either ideological in nature, following the left-right dimension of the Cold War and which did not necessarily accept the nascent national boundaries suggested by colonial spheres of influence, or they were idealistically multiracial.

Of the other parties that are relevant today, all but Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) were formed after Independence in 1957, in fact as late as after the Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963. PAS was from the start an Islamist split from UMNO. [Most of the parties in East Malaysia are communally based in principle].

In the late 1960s, as left-wing parties suffered self-doubt and strategic mistakes, we witnessed the rise of several new parties which were in principle multiracial ones. Most important of these were the Parti Gerakan Rakyat, which almost immediately became the government of Penang State; and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), forced into existence after Singapore's PAP within Malaysia had to be disbanded after Singapore went its own way in 1965. To be sure, these parties have tended to be largely Chinese-based despite their expounded ideology.

And so, on the surface, these were the three inter-related dimensions that formed the backdrop for Malaysian political discourses—ethnocentrism, multiracialism and socialism. To that can be added religion, which gained importance in the Mahathir Mohamad period (1981-2003) after being incorporated into the legal, architectural and bureaucratic structure of the country. This was a powerful strategic move by Mahathir pounced within the ethnocentric battle that had become hugely prominent after the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented in 1970. This comprehensive affirmative action programme was constructed to better the socio-economic lot of the Malay community as a whole, and was scheduled to end in 1990.

Since Islam is used to define Malayness in the Constitution, this last parameter cannot be understood outside the general inter-ethnic balancing act. In fact, the split of PAS away from UMNO in 1951 already hinted at a deep uneasiness within the Malay community about the direction that Malaysian nation building was to go.

Of course, the adoption of the term "Bumiputera" by the late 1960s seared a deep and indelible line between Chinese and non-Muslim Indians on one side, and Malays and indigenous groups on the other. The NEP helped provide powerful economic support for that division.

UMNO would survive a couple of splits, the most important of which was when Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah formed Semangat '46 after losing an internal battle within UMNO to Mahathir in the late 1980s. That party rejoined UMNO later.

In fact, splits in UMNO, which started with the resignation of its founder-president Onn Jaafar in 1950, are an important dynamic in the development of Malaysian politics, and will continue to be so even in the future.

REFORMING MAHATHIRISM 1.0

Another UMNO split came with the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. What is interesting with the formation of the Parti Keadilan Nasional by Anwar's wife—Wan Azizah Wan Ismail—in the wake of her husband's arrest and imprisonment by Mahathir was that it joined up with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) in 2003 to form Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). PRM was in fact a rump socialist party. Today, the last socialist party in Malaysia, Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), which was allowed registration in 2009, stays friendly to the opposition coalition.

Thus, Anwar Ibrahim's refusal to leave quietly in September 1998 precipitated a movement whose impact on Malaysian politics and social activism should not be underestimated. He became the lightning rod for general dissent which immediately led to frighteningly bad election results for the BN in 1999, and which arguably hastened Mahathir's retirement as prime minister.

Mahathir's choice of Abdullah Badawi ahead of Najib Razak as his successor in 2003 proved strategically astute and the BN won by a record number of parliamentary seats in 2004. However, Abdullah's failure to deliver on his many promises soon revealed a political consciousness and longing in society which had been growing for some time. This was fuelled by the increasingly young age of the population; the continued urbanisation of the Malay community; and by the advent of new technological means for communication and dissemination of information.

The post-Mahathir period was beginning to take definite form. Reforms were now the order of the day. Discerning what was rhetoric and what was sincere; what was effective and what was spin became the new way for judging politicians.

Trounced badly by Abdullah's reform agenda in 2004, opposition parties had to undergo some serious soul searching if they were to remain relevant. The emergent mindset of reform quite naturally led public discussions towards fair governance, and to the reforming of the electoral system itself.

The discourses of the Reformasi Movement that was now strongly connected to the different opposition parties involved notions of transparency, justice and accountability. From around 2005 onwards, this new political dimension came to intermingle with the traditional ones, and by the time the 12th general elections took place in 2008, it had caught the imagination of the urban young, at least in the northern parts of the peninsula.

The electoral reform movement—nicknamed *Bersih*—seemed perfect at providing a solvent discourse for the differing values of the opposition parties. And it was a technical argument that could not easily turn racial or religious. Despite these parties' willingness to work with each other once the Reformasi Movement had started, the preferred expressions of their values were serious stumbling blocks to their wish to project a viable coalition.

More importantly, *Bersih* quickly inspired various social movements and encouraged the political activism that is still growing today, now expressed through a diversity of colours. It is thus the relationship between the social groundswell—which follows socio-economic dynamics—and the strategies and needs of the opposition parties that warrants study, alongside the detrimental effects on the BN of UMNO's increasing dominance over its allies. The latter's undermining of the credibility of parties such as the MIC, the Gerakan and the MCA had been obvious for some time, but burst into full fury only on election day, March 8, 2008. UMNO's success was becoming BN's failure.

The loss of five states and the two-third majority in parliament in 2008 was blamed on Abdullah Badawi, and in a soft coup a year later, he was replaced by the man who had been bypassed earlier for the top position in the country. The new prime minister's job was to regain the two-thirds majority, or at least win back votes.

Najib Razak's first term in office, from April 2009 to April 2013, can rightly be considered an extended campaign period rather than a nation building phase. His strategy could be poignantly called "Reforming Mahathirism 2.0", involving some major changes in legislation and a lot of sloganeering. How the excessive politicking of that period, especially the end of it altered Malaysian politics is a subject worthy of future investigation.

THE 13TH GENERAL ELECTIONS

Most things seemed to have been said by the time the campaign period began on 20th April. Throughout the fifteen days before Election Day on May 5, issues were more exhorted than debated. When certain top BN leaders, including Mahathir, tried to use threats to win votes, PR campaigners tried to create a carnival atmosphere to counteract the atmosphere of fear; while PR rallies collected huge amounts in contributions from the public, BN candidates expended immensely larger sums to buy votes through free dinners and other means; and while the PR clothed itself in the chosen colours of various activist movements, the BN flooded the streets with tight rows of blue flags. There was hardly any public dialogue or debate between the two sides during the campaign itself, which was a clear reflection of how polarised Malaysia's political climate was, and how uncompromising the two positions had become.

The PR's strategy was to bring the groundswell to Johor. In that, they may have succeeded only to a limited extent, but the results did show that the Chinese community throughout the peninsula was now quite decidedly supporting the opposition, synchronised in a broad general swing in that direction in all the country's major urban centres.

As the campaign period drew to a close, it had become more obvious that voters were consciously going to support one or the other coalition more than they would an individual or a party. In that sense, the voter support in urban areas for the PR increased in an exponential manner.

The main T-shirt sold at PR rallies in Johor Bahru had opposition leader Lim Kit Siang's portrait placed alongside the Malay words "Ubah Bersama Lim Kit Siang" (Change with Lim Kit Siang); a PAS rock band would play at concert-style DAP rallies titled "Rock the Vote"; and the flags of all three opposition parties were consciously intermingled. Curious crowds in the beginning of the campaign multiplied into gigantic masses by the end of the 15-day period.

But be that as it may, Najib Razak managed to win a majority of parliamentary seats on May 5, despite losing the popular vote. Though narrow, his victory was enough to secure him a five-year term as prime minister. But it is expected that he will have to fight for survival when the UMNO elections take place later this year.

With its allies more decimated than ever, UMNO is now shorn of any pretence of being merely one among equals within the BN. UMNO's dominance in the coalition is now indubitable, and the special logic of the BN as a grouping of parties representing all major communities is no longer valid. It will now have to exercise its power more wisely and less arrogantly than it had been doing in recent years. Most of its support now comes from the southern state of Johor, and from East Malaysia. At the same time, UMNO has to deal with three opposition parties which are the second, third and fourth largest in parliament.

The huge mal-apportionment in constituency size which made BN's victory possible, will be a major issue in coming years. The social movements, especially *Bersih*, will continue to enjoy relevance, partly thanks to the growing incongruence between seats won and the popular vote.

Where the PR parties are concerned, with the loss of Kedah state, each of them will now control the government of one state, and all with a two-thirds majority at that. Being second-term governments (at least in Penang and Selangor, Kelantan having been under PAS for a much longer time), public expectations on them will be higher and public readiness to give them the benefit of the doubt will lessen. However, the increased support for them in these states does declare that they have done well enough so far in the eyes of voters.

Improving Malaysia's governance, delivering on promises and engendering pride and optimism in the people in their states will be their main challenges. Being models of good governance will be their best argument against the diehard support that the BN enjoys in rural areas.

With regards to Prime Minister Najib Razak, after he survives the next UMNO elections, his job will be an even tougher one. His transformation programmes will have to be repackaged to minimise allegations of being mere electoral spin, and his

One Malaysia catchphrase—should he retain that—will have to go beyond being a simple slogan that is displayed *ad nauseum*. Overselling did not work too well before May 5, and is not likely to work in the future unless it is given substance by his new Cabinet.

Competing in good governance practices may become the dimension that will technocratize Malaysian policymaking and end the manipulative politicking that now plagues the country at many levels.

Hopefully, with elections five years away, the culture of politicking and the campaigning mode will subside and Malaysians and their various governments will get down to nation building instead, and rely on their performance to convince voters of their competence.

Along the way, they will have to find ways of collaborating for the good of the country without fear of being branded as sell-outs to their cause. Compromises between coalitions need to be seen as being just as valid as compromises within them where policymaking is concerned.

Only when that happens on a regular basis can Malaysia call itself a mature two-party democracy.

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