



UNISCI Discussion Papers

A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF MALAYSIA'S ELEVENTH GENERAL ELECTION

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Introduction

The Malaysian general election held on 21 March 2004 proved to be the most successful electoral victory for the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN or National Front) in the history of Malaysian electoral politics. The BN coalition party, fronted by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) along with major allies the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), garnered a total of 199 of 219 parliamentary seats and limited the opposition to a meager 20 seats. All in all, the BN won 64% of popular support.

Results of state elections, held concurrently in all the states in the Malaysian federal system with the general election except for Sarawak, were equally impressive, with the BN amassing a total of 453 out of 504 state seats. More striking however, were the results in Kelantan, the stronghold of the Islamic opposition PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia), and Terengganu, which PAS managed to wrest from UMNO at the 1999 elections. How did BN manage such a dramatic reversal over such a short period, and what are the implications of this result for the future of Malaysian politics?

1999

Indeed, in order to assess the magnitude of the BN's "comeback" at the 2004 general elections, it is worth revisiting the outcome of the previous elections in 1999 so as to give our discussion a proper context.

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The 1999 general election was a dismal one for the BN. While the coalition did achieve the psychological two-thirds parliamentary majority, UMNO, the linchpin in the BN, experienced its worst result ever. In terms of parliamentary seats, it managed to secure on 72 (down from 89 in the precious election) and witnessed four ministers and five deputy ministers defeated in the process. On the other hand, PAS, the Islamic opposition, managed to successfully leverage on popular dissatisfaction with then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's sacking and incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim, the treatment that Anwar was meted in prison (where he was apparently beaten by the then Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Rahim Noor), his controversial trial, and the consequent rise of the *Reformasi* movement to not only retain its control of Kelantan (winning 41 out of 43 seats in the state legislature), but to register a convincing win in Terengganu as well (with an impressive 28 out of 32 seats). Equally significant was the performance of the Justice Party or KeADILan, which was then recently formed in the wake of the Reformasi movement and won some 11.5% of popular votes nationwide, along with 5 federal and 4 state seats.

The Abdullah Badawi Factor

Much of the credit for UMNO and BN's resounding success has been attributed to the new Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the policies he initiated upon assuming office on 31 October 2003. Abdullah had come into office with a distinctly different political persona from that of Mahathir. Seen as a "Mr. Nice Guy", Abdullah projected an image of a leader who could identify with the masses and approach politics and governance in a conciliatory and measured fashion that was viewed as a welcome re-orientation from the Mahathir era. Abdullah's style was exemplified by his call for Malaysians to "work with me; not for me". Abdullah's personable manner was further augmented by his Islamic credentials. While not a religious leader in the strictest sense, Abdullah came from a rich lineage of Islamic scholars and was himself a graduate of Islamic studies. Given this background, he proceeded to counteract the moral superiority of his PAS opponents in a manner his predecessor never could. Images of him conducting prayers at the opening of UMNO meetings and more significantly at the event of the passing of the PAS President Fadzil Noor gained him much mileage among the Muslim electorate. Equally noteworthy was his attempt to appeal to non-Muslims, where over the Christmas holidays he sent out 1 500 Christmas greeting cards to prominent Christian leaders of the Malaysian community, the first ever Malaysian Prime Minister to do so.

Abdullah further stamped his authority by way of a highly publicized war on corruption that began with civil service reform, particularly of the police force, and made its way up to the trials of Tan Sri Eric Chia, a close associate of Mahathir, and Kasitah Gaddam, then Minister for Land and Cooperative Development. While the arrests of Chia and Kasitah were profiled extensively by the media, equally significant were his appointments of Datuk Mohamad Bakri Omar and Justice Tan Sri Abdul Malek Ahmad, both widely seen as incorruptible men of integrity, to the powerful positions of Inspector-General of Police and President of the Court of Appeals; both appointments demonstrated Abdullah's commitment to reform, as the eventual release of Anwar Ibrahim on 2 September 2004 was to prove.



In a move that endeared him further to the rural Malay electorate, the Abdullah administration reversed the government's previous inclinations towards big-spending mega-projects and chose to give agriculture and rural development, industries that only featured peripherally in Mahathir's industrialization drive, much closer attention. The appointment of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, an Abdullah ally and senior UMNO leader, as Rural Development Minister was particularly instructive of the new government's intention to stress agricultural development.

By stressing issues such as corruption and the plight of the poor, Abdullah had effectively undercut many of the key issues that the Malaysian opposition had traditionally leveraged on. Together with an increasing indifference towards the Anwar saga among the general population, the opposition soon found itself approaching the March 2004 general election with no major platform on which to capitalize on its prior success. Perhaps the clearest manifestation of his personal triumph was the convincing re-capture of the state of Terengganu, where he served as the Terengganu UMNO Liaison chief.

Demise of the Opposition

As alluded earlier, PAS and KeADILan, the main beneficiaries of the 1999 swing to the opposition, not only failed to make any headway but had in fact lost substantial ground to the BN.

The Islamic opposition had harboured prospects of not only holding on to power in Kelantan and Terengganu, but also in seizing the initiative in the other northern Malay states of Kedah and Perlis. While PAS did manage to increase its overall popular support from 15% in 1999 to 15.3% in 2004, it lost substantial ground in terms of parliamentary and state seats. PAS' defeats have been largely attributed to the party's inability to convince the broader Malaysian electorate of its Islamic state platform. After the death of the moderate PAS President Fadzil Noor in July 2002, Abdul Hadi Awang, a fiery cleric and contemporary of Fadzil Noor, took over the reins of the party and propelled it further down the Islamisation path by instituting policies such as separate queues in supermarkets and discouraging. In the wake of September 11, such policies further alienated the Islamic opposition from the moderate Muslim and non-Muslim electorate. The release of the Islamic State document by hardliners within the PAS leadership, which had as its cornerstone the implementation of Hudud laws, worked further to the party's disadvantage. Similarly, Parti KeADILan was unable to carry the momentum generated by its 1999 general election platform of reformation into 2004. With Abdullah's highly-publicised war on corruption and call for reform of the civil service, KeADILan saw many of its reformist agendas usurped by the ruling coalition. Moreover, the party's excessive emphasis on the Anwar issue, while a source of strength in the 1999 campaign, proved to be a major stumbling block, drawing attention to the party's inability to plot a political agenda beyond the issue of Anwar Ibrahim.



Unlike PAS and KeADILan, the multi-ethnic DAP (Demotratric Action Party) faired much better in 2004. After jettisoning its ill-fated alliance with PAS in 1999, the DAP managed to regain its position as the dominant opposition party in the Malaysian parliament, securing 12 seats and 9.78% of the popular vote.

Implications of the Election Results

While the election results of 2004 appear at the surface to be a resounding victory for Abdullah Badawi and the Barisan Nasional, a closer look at the elections will uncover several anomalies and developments that are portentous for the future of politics in Malaysia.

In truth, the EC (Electoral Commission) had already put in place several controversial policies that proffered advantages to the incumbent. The campaign period of 8 days stipulated by the EC was the shortest in the history of Malaysian elections. Prior to that, the chairman of the EC, Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman, had disqualified several top KeADILan leaders from contesting seats as they had court convictions. Other oversights include late announcement of polling locations, resulting in numerous voters registered in one place but arriving at another to vote, allegations that the EC favoured incumbent flags to be flown at polling stations, the provision of 600 000 registered voters' addresses for the Prime Minister to write personal letters to them, encouraging them to vote, the unauthorized extension of voting hours, numerous discrepancies in the electoral register. These discrepancies were most vivid in the case of Terengganu, a front-line state in the UMNO-PAS battle, where voter turnout was 17.7% higher than the national average.

Gerrymandering was another major factor in the 2004 election, where the constituency delineation exercise, carried once every 9 years, ensured that pro-BN states such as Johor and Sabah had increased seat allocations while states where the opposition was stronger, such as Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis, received no additional seats. Moreover, constituencies with large BN majorities in 1999 were broken up in a fashion that allowed the EC to transfer certain districts to prop other weaker constituencies.

Another major concern that the 2004 election draws attention to is the question of the Islamisation of politics in Malaysia. Going by reports in the international media, the electoral result signaled the "roll-back of Islamisation" and "triumph of secularism". These perspectives are highly problematic. It is clear that the BN had contested, and won, by undermining the PAS version of Islamist politics. Nevertheless, the BN had done so by outbidding and "out-Islamising" PAS, not by promoting secularism. This was demonstrated most profoundly in Abdullah's introduction of the concept of Islam Hadhari (Islamic Civilisation) in opposition to the Islamic State agenda of PAS. UMNO was clearly aware that in order to regain the initiative from PAS it had had to buttress its Islamic credentials, and it



did so by introducing a large number of “Islamic” candidates, including a popular female Muslim speaker and the Imam of the national mosque.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the 2004 general election was a personal victory for Abdullah Badawi which strengthened his position in UMNO considerably, a timely recovery for UMNO after the debacle of 1999, and a major triumph for the BN coalition. Likewise, the elections were a major setback for the opposition. PAS must now undergo a process of soul-searching as its leadership and membership decides if moderation is at hand, or if the party should continue with its staunch, exclusivist policy of insistence on the Islamic State as its primary political objective. Likewise, KeADILan, which managed to secure only one parliamentary seat, stares extinction in the face. While DAP has returned as the dominant opposition, it too will have to think through the issue of succession and party rejuvenation, given that many of their successful candidates were from the old guard.

The election triumph has however raised further questions. Now that UMNO’s hand has been strengthened considerably, will the party soon face a threat to its internal stability? One recalls for example, how the comfortable victories of 1986 and 1995 in fact heralded the most fractious periods of UMNO history. Similarly, while few question the sincerity of Abdullah Badawi, what are the prospects of further democratisation and reformation in Malaysia now that the opposition has been severely weakened? On the other hand, given that UMNO and BN essentially won by “out-Islamising” PAS, to what extent will the Islamisation process in Malaysian politics continue unabated? A possible indication of this can perhaps be found in the Terengganu state assembly, where the question is whether UMNO, which is currently in firm control of the state, is prepared to discard the Hudud laws that the previous PAS state government had formulated when it controlled the state legislature from 1999 to 2004. It certainly seems that the 2004 general election results has raised as many questions about the future shape of Malaysian politics as it can claim to have answered.