



Jan Senkyr is Resident Representative of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Malaysia.

POLITICAL AWAKENING IN MALAYSIA

DESPITE VICTORY, GOVERNMENT COALITION EMERGES WEAKENED FROM THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Jan Senkyr

The parliamentary elections on 5 May 2013 did not fulfil the hopes of the opposition and their supporters for a change of government and new politics in Malaysia. The vehement commitment of civil society, the high turnout and country-wide gains for the opposition all provide clear evidence of the political awakening of the Malaysian people. The National Front has governed without interruption since Malaysia gained independence. For the first time, the National Front feared being voted out and was only narrowly able to ensure electoral victory with considerable losses. The increase of votes for the opposition is an indication that in the future two strong political blocks will compete for power in Malaysia. Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious population is divided into those who support the status quo and those who want change. The government faces the challenge of reconciling society and finding a national consensus for Malaysia's future development.

BACKGROUND

This year's parliamentary elections were highly anticipated. Developments in recent years had led to the conclusion that possibly, for the first time in Malaysia's history, a change of government and historical turning point was in store. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has been governed by a party coalition led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which has been known as Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) since 1974.¹ With

1 | Until that time, the coalition was known as the "Alliance".

the exception of 1969, the Barisan Nasional always won a two-thirds legislative majority in parliament which gave them the authority to make changes to the constitution. During the early parliamentary election in 2008, the BN experienced an unexpectedly large loss of votes and, besides losing the two-thirds legislative majority in parliament, also lost the government majority in five of the thirteen states. Observers spoke of a “political tsunami”. Election analyses showed that the votes of Chinese and Indian ethnic minorities in particular, who felt disadvantaged by the government’s pro-Malay politics, had crossed over to the opposition. However, the disunity and increasing dissatisfaction of ethnic Malays, who form the largest ethnic group as UMNO’s voter base, contributed to the poor results for the government coalition. As a consequence of the election slump, the prime minister and BN chairman, Abdullah Badawi,² was forced to step down and pass his position to his deputy, Najib Razak.³

Since his appointment in April 2009, Najib, the son of a former prime minister⁴ and prominent UMNO politician, has made efforts to profile himself as a reformer and national peacemaker, in order to win back the lost votes. The concept “1Malaysia”, introduced in 2010, is supposed to increase national unity and ethnic harmony in society as well as an efficient government leadership of state structures. Improvements in the six “National Key Result Areas” in particular are to be made: preventing crime, fighting corruption, improving access to education, increasing living standards for people with low income, improving infrastructure in rural areas and enhancing public transport.

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With regards to the economy, the government would continue to accelerate the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), announced in September 2010, with its long-term objective to attain the status of high income

2 | Full name: Dato’ Seri Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi.

3 | Full name: Dato’ Sri Haji Mohammad Najib bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak.

4 | Tun Abdul Razak, 1970-1976 Malaysia’s second prime minister.

nation⁵ by 2020. The changes in legislation were viewed positively, which aimed to achieve improvements in important areas such as internal security (Security Offences Bill, Peaceful Assembly Act), freedom of speech and the press (Printing Presses and Publications Bill), education (Private Higher Educational Institutions Bill, Universities and University Colleges Bill, Educational Institutions Bill) as well as voting rights (Elections Offences Bill).⁶ The controversial and highly criticised Internal Security Act (ISA) was rescinded in March 2012. The ISA originated from the 1950s and followed legislation by the former British colonial administration. Originally conceived to prevent communist uprisings and to remove them from circulation without legal delays, the legislation was later used against opposition and government critics in particular. The ISA was replaced by the anti-terror legislation Security Offences Bill and regulations regarding the right to assembly Peaceful Assembly Act.

On a personal basis, Najib is well-liked: his approval rating in the population reached 72 per cent in May 2010, but sank again and has been between 63 to 65 per cent ever since. Despite his comprehensive programme of reforms, Najib was unable to substantially improve the popularity of the UMNO party and government coalition BN. On a personal basis, Najib is well-liked: his approval rating in the population reached 72 per cent in May 2010, but sank again and has been between 63 to 65 per cent⁷ ever since. However, the support for his government coalition rarely surpassed the 48 per cent mark during this time. Parts of the population view a large proportion of the reform plans as insufficient or as a complex advertising campaign. Critics accuse the government of incompetence, corruption, nepotism and ethnic discrimination.⁸

5 | This objective was announced as part of Prime Minister Tun Mahathir bin Mohamad's long-term programme at the beginning of the 1990s, and supported through the state's major programme "Vision 2020".

6 | The change to election law was retracted by the government in May 2012.

7 | Survey by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research (MCOR), 15-28 Dec 2012, http://merdeka.org/pages/04_inNews01.html (accessed 19 Jun 2013).

8 | See Rob O'Brien, "Malaysian elections: 'There's big corruption, a lot of state abuse'", *The Independent*, 3 May 2013, <http://independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/-8603381.html> (accessed 18 Jun 2013).

EXPECTATION FOR NEW ELECTIONS

Faced with the population's initial relatively positive view of Najib's reform politics, political observers assumed that the prime minister might call snap elections⁹ at the end of 2012, in order to, on the one hand, obtain a mandate from the people for his reforms, and, on the other hand, to firm up his position of power towards conservative opponents within the UMNO party and the BN. First estimates assumed that new elections would take place at the same time as the state elections in Sarawak in April 2011. After this, new rumours kept circulating of coming election dates, so that in the last two years, Malaysian politics was constantly in expectation of new elections and therefore de facto in a constant election mode. This led to stagnation in many areas of political and economic life.

For several years now, a primary concern of the opposition and large parts of civil society has been the call for reform of the Malaysian election system. A coalition of non-governmental organisations with the name Bersih¹⁰

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have organised several large demonstrations since 2007 to add pressure to this demand. Tens of thousands of people took part in the demonstrations in July 2011 and April 2013. Both demonstrations were broken up violently by the police. Bersih poses eight demands to the Malaysian election commission: Cleaning the voting register of "phantom voters", reforming the postal vote, using indelible ink to mark voter's fingers, extending the election campaign to at least 21 days, free and fair media access for all parties including the opposition, the independence and impartiality of the election commission, the prevention of corruption and vote-buying, as well as the prevention of smear campaigns. In October 2011, on Prime Minister Najib's order, a special committee for the reform of the Malaysian parliament was formed. After six months, the committee produced a report with corresponding recommendations and submitted it to the election commission.

9 | The majority voting system in Malaysia grants the prime minister the authority to dissolve parliament thus forcing new elections, at any time during their five-year legislation period.

10 | Bersih is the Malay word for "clean".

When Prime Minister Najib announced the dissolution of parliament on the 3 April 2013, thereby paving the way for new elections, the step had long lost its surprise effect. As the normal legislation period would have ended on 28 April 2013, the elections would have had to take place 60 days later anyway. However, 3 April had a personal significance for Najib: He had been sworn in as prime minister four years earlier on that very same date.

ELECTION SYSTEM

The Malaysian constitution sets a majority representation system corresponding to the Westminster parliamentary model. The national parliament (Dewan Rakyat)¹¹ is elected

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for a five year legislation period, but can be prematurely dissolved by the king¹² upon the prime minister's recommendation. Within 60 days of the dissolution of parliament, new elections must be held, and the date is set by an independent election commission consisting of seven members. Besides the national parliament, the parliaments for the thirteen federal states are elected for a five-year term. The dissolution of the state parliament is made upon the recommendation by the minister president through the head of state.¹³ Here too, new elections must be held within 60 days of the dissolution of parliaments. Since 2004, it was stipulated that the votes for the national parliaments and state parliaments must take place simultaneously, with the exception of Sarawak.¹⁴

On 10 April 2013, the election commission announced 5 May 2013 as the official election date. Simultaneously it designated 20 April as the nomination day for candidates. The official election campaign period, which lasted

11 | Besides the parliament there is also the senate (Dewan Negara) whose members are partially voted by the state parliaments and partially appointed by the king.

12 | The king – with the official title "Yang di-Pertuan Agong" – is chosen every five years from the rulers of the nine sultanates according to the principle of rotation. Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah has been the king of Malaysia since 13 Dec 2011.

13 | In the nine sultanates, this is the sultan, in the four federal states, the governor.

14 | Since 1979, Sarawak has voted at a different point in time, the next votes are to be held in 2016.

15 days, began on this date. Even though this period was longer than in most of the previous elections, it was criticised as too short and disadvantageous for the opposition. An early vote (e.g. for police, military, medical personnel) was possible on 30 April. Malaysians abroad being enfranchised were able to vote on 28 April by postal ballot at embassies and general consulates. 13.3 million people were eligible to vote in the 13th Malaysian parliamentary election.¹⁵ Around 2.3 million of the electorate were classified as first-time voters. All Malaysian citizens of at least 21 years of age who have been registered in the electorate register are eligible to vote.

31 authorised parties competed for the 222 seats in the national parliament and for a total of 505 seats in state parliaments. The government majority in the national parliament is a minimum of 112 seats. In local parliaments, this varies according to the total number of seats. On the nomination day, on 20 April, 579 candidates stood for election to the national parliament. A total of 1,322 candidates competed for the state parliament seats.

PARTIES

Even though 31 parties were permitted to take part, these competed as two large blocks: The government coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), and the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR). This was a novelty, as in the previous election in 2008, the opposition parties had competed independently and only formed a coalition after the unexpectedly good election results.

The Barisan Nasional is currently a coalition of 13 parties. The strongest force is the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), which, with its three million members, is Malaysia's largest party. They represent the interests of ethnic Malays, who constitute 51 per cent of the entire population and are therefore Malaysia's largest ethnic group. According to the constitution, Islam is an inseparable part of Malay identity. In this respect, the UMNO can be described as a national conservative Islamic party. The

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15 | In 2010 Malaysia's total population was around 28.3 million.

party advocates privileges¹⁶ for ethnic Malays, Islamic values and economically liberal politics. Two more important coalition parties are the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), who respectively represent the interests of ethnic Chinese (25 per cent of the total population and ethnic Indians (seven per cent). Furthermore, two smaller parties, GERAKAN and PPP, four parties in Sarawak (PBB, SUPP, SPDP, PRS) and four parties (UPKO, PBS, PBRIS, LDP) in Sabah in Borneo, are part of BN. While UMNO, MCA, MIC, GERAKAN and PPP are only represented on the Malaysian peninsula, the remaining parties are limited to Sarawak and Sabah. The BN stood for election with a shared list of candidates with their own election programme and the BN logo. The chairman of BN is UMNO party leader and Prime Minister Najib Razak.

The opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat consists of three parties: Parti Keadilan Rakyat (The People's Justice Party, PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Islam Se-Malaysia Party (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS). Anwar Ibrahim¹⁷ is the most prominent politician and informal leader of PR. In the 1990s, Anwar was the Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister and was seen as the political protégé of long-standing Prime Minister and UMNO chairman, Mahathir Mohamad.¹⁸ In 1998, the two quarrelled and Anwar was dismissed from all his offices. A year later, Anwar was accused of corruption and sentenced to six years in prison. A short while later, a further prison sentence of nine years for supposed homosexuality¹⁹ was added. In 2004, the federal court rescinded the homosexuality verdict and Anwar Ibrahim was released from prison. In a by-election in April 2008,²⁰ he was voted in as a

16 | UMNO is responsible for the introduction of "Bumiputra politics", which gives the ethnic Malays political and economic privileges. With its implementation as part of the "New Economic Policy" in 1971, ethnic Malays were to be supported in areas in which they lagged behind ethnic Chinese and Indians in order to prevent ethnic tensions.

17 | Full name: Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim.

18 | Full name: Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad.

19 | Practicing homosexuality is a criminal offence in Malaysia.

20 | Due to a ten-year ban on political activities, which only ended on 14 Apr 2008, Anwar Ibrahim was not able to take part on the regular election date on 8 Mar 2008. After his wife Wan Azizah declined her mandate, Anwar was voted as her successor.

Member of the Parliament for the PKR. Anwar Ibrahim supporters founded the reform movement Reformasi in 1999, which resulted in the Parti Keadilan Nasional. In 2003, they fused with the Malaysian People's Party and called themselves People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR). It advocates social-liberal values; the chairperson is Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.



Supporters of the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat in the Jaya Stadium of Petaling. For the elections, the three parties formed a loose alliance. | Source: Hitori Bocchi, flickr (CC BY).

The DAP was founded in 1965 and is a member of the Socialist International. It advocates social-democratic economics and stands for secular values. Its voters mostly consist of urban ethnic Chinese. The chairperson is Karpal Singh.

The PAS was founded as an Islamic party in 1955. From 1973 to 1978, it was a member of the BN, but then distanced itself from UMNO. In 1990, it was the first opposition party to win the election in a federal state (Kelantan), where it has ruled ever since. PAS advocates Islamic values and demands the introduction of Shariah law including the *Hudud*.²¹ After the 2004 elections, where it suffered a severe loss of votes, PAS steered a more moderate Islamic political course. The president of PAS is Abdul Hadi Awang.

21 | Sanctions according to Islamic law; theoretically, methods such as stoning, whipping or amputation of limbs can be applied.

The PR opposition coalition went into the 2013 elections as a loose alliance. Three parties campaigned under their own party logos and a shared election manifesto, and in some constituencies, their candidates stood against one another. However, the election strategy was closely coordinated, and in many constituencies, efforts were made to avoid double or triple candidatures.

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Both political camps presented their election programmes early on: the opposition coalition, PKR, on 25 February, and the government coalition, BN, on 6 April. Surprisingly, both programmes were quite similar in terms of content, and in some points, they even agreed. Therefore, both sides spoke of decreasing high car prices caused by taxes and customs, increasing the number of police personnel for crime prevention, building a transit motorway through the states of Sarawak and Sabah and to decrease consumer prices of both states to the levels on the Malaysian peninsula. The striking similarity of the election promises caused PKR to accuse the Government camp of plagiarism. In response, BN argued that most of the points were part of the current reform programme of the Najib government and therefore were included in the election programme.

The 15 day election campaign was intensive and very confrontational at times. Thanks to the long-awaited election date, both political camps were well-prepared. In the choice and nomination of candidates, applicants with the

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best chances of success were sought. Both coalition parties called upon their members to be unified and disciplined in order to prevent losing votes due to internal rivalries or sabotage. In the past, ever so often, disappointed candidates hoping for a place on

the list then stood for election as independent candidates against their own party. This had cost the BN valuable votes in the 2008 elections. Both the BN and the PR therefore threatened to immediately exclude any defectors who stood as independents from their party.

A few days before nomination day for candidates, the Registry of Societies (ROS), the registration authority for authorising parties, announced that the DAP's executive committee was not legitimately recognised due to irregularities during their last party congress.²² This would have meant that DAP candidates would not be allowed to stand for election for their party, because their nomination letter would have to be issued by the DAP's general secretary (whom the ROS refused to recognise). This led to both coalition parties, the PKR and the PAS, to accept DAP candidates on their lists. At the last moment, however, the authority relented, and notified the DAP in writing on 19 April, saying that they did not have any objections against candidature under the DAP logo. The process enhanced the opposition coalition's image, as it was able to demonstrate solidarity and cohesion.

During the election campaign, according to expectations, BN proclaimed itself a guarantor of economic growth, security and political stability and warned voters against risking their country's future with a change in government. They labelled the opposition an unstable alliance of parties with contradictory interests and therefore unable to govern. They warned of a loss of Malay and Islamic identity of the country in the case of a PR victory. The opposition, on the other hand, promised a new political style, good governance, transparency and social justice. It accused the government of corruption, nepotism, racism and mismanagement.

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The voters were most interested in the topic of economics as well as social issues and national security. A survey²³ in December 2012 listed the points which were seen as priorities: crime prevention, improvement of the election system, affordable housing, fighting inflation, extending infrastructure in rural areas and environmental questions. Although there were few reliable public²⁴ opinion polls, the

22 | During the DAP's party congress in December 2012, the central committee election had to be recounted due to a technical error. Some of the candidates who came off badly then filed a complaint with ROS.

23 | MCOR, n. 7.

24 | Naturally, government and opposition commissioned their own internal polls.

mood in the independent media and social networks in particular, led to the conclusion that a head-to-head race would result on Election Day. A survey by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research²⁵ on the 3 May saw the Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat as nearly equal, with 41 to 42 per cent. The publication of these figures shortly before the election was heavily criticised by the government. Meanwhile, the opposition warned of possible electoral manipulation and called on its supporters to remain vigilant at polling stations.

THE RESULTS

According to the official final result,²⁶ BN emerged as the winner from the elections on 5 May 2013, with 133 out of 222 seats in the parliament. Even though they had lost seven seats in comparison to 2008 (140), they still held a comfortable government majority.²⁷ PR received 89 seats in the parliament, a gain of seven mandates in contrast to 2008 (82 seats). With that, it remained the opposition. None of the independents were voted in. With 84.8 per cent, it was the highest voter turnout in Malaysia's history.



Street decorated with the symbols of the governing coalition Barisan Nasional: BN emerged as the winner from the elections with 133 out of 222 seats in parliament. | Source: Alan A. Lew, flickr (CC BY-NC-SA).

25 | MCOR, n. 7.

26 | The election results were published on 22 May 2013 in the official gazette. An appeal against the results could be submitted until 12 Jun 2013.

27 | A minimum of 112 seats are required for a government majority.

Within the BN government coalition, the UMNO was able to further strengthen their leading position, with a gain of nine seats (to a total of 88 seats). The biggest loser was the MCA, which lost eight seats and will now only be represented by seven mandates in parliament. On the evening of the election, they immediately declared that they wouldn't want to take on any government office due to the electoral debacle. A majority of the votes of the ethnic Chinese voters had obviously gone to the DAP. It was able to gain ten seats, and with 38 parliamentary mandates, it is the strongest force in the Pakatan Rakyat opposition coalition (PR). The PKR received 30 seats (one seat less than in 2008) and PAS commands 21 mandates (minus two seats).

Table 1

Seat distribution in the national parliament

	Parliament seats 2013	Difference to 2008
Government coalition Barisan Nasional (BN)	133	- 7
UMNO	88	+ 9
MCA	7	- 8
MIC	4	+ 1
Parties in Sarawak and Sabah	33	
Opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR)	89	+ 7
DAP	38	+ 10
PKR	30	- 1
PAS	21	- 2
Total	122	

In the federal states, Barisan Nasional received 275 out of 505 seats, the Pakatan Rakyat parties received 229 seats and one seat was won by the STAR party in Sabah. The BN governs in nine federal states: Perlis, Kedah, Terengganu, Perak, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor and Sabah. They have governed in Sarawak since the previous elections in 2011. The Pakatan Rakyat coalition governs in three federal states: Kelantan, Penang and Selangor.

Therefore, the government coalition, BN, was able to regain one state, Kedah. In Perak, where the BN lost in 2008, but was able to govern after a few representatives switched allegiances, they were able to regain a majority of seats (31 out of 59 seats). The opposition coalition, PR, not only defended the three federal states they govern – Kelantan, Penang and Selangor, but was able to obtain a two-thirds majority in all three state parliaments.

THE ELECTION ANALYSIS

There is no true victor. The ruling BN has successfully defended their claim to power, but has had to accept heavy losses. The declared goal to regain a two-thirds majority in national parliament has fallen far short. Moreover, the attempt to regain the strategically important federal state of Selangor failed dramatically. The PR was even able to attain a two-thirds majority there. Besides Penang (which is also governed by the PR), Selangor is the richest and most productive state in the Malaysian Federation. In addition, this is the heart of Prime Minister Najib's constituency, who personally led the electoral campaign there. A particularly sensitive topic for the BN is the fact

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that they only won 47.4 per cent of the votes on a federal level; in contrast, the opposition parties were able to attain 50.8 per cent. Therefore, the government can no longer claim that the majority of the population stands behind them. The fact that the BN was still able to obtain 60 per cent of the parliamentary seats serves to demonstrate how disproportional and unfair the distribution of constituencies is. The maximum difference between the required votes for parliamentary seats in some constituencies is eight-fold.²⁸

The opposition coalition, PR, clearly failed in their mission to take over the government, despite considerable gains. The change in the Malay majority's mood required for an electoral victory seemed to have been insufficient. Both the PKR and the PAS party, both appealing to Malay voters

28 | The smallest constituencies include Igan (18,000 voters), Lubok Antu (19,000) and Putrajaya (28,000), the largest include Kapar (144,000 voters), Serdang (133,000), Gombak (123,000). See Ramesh Rajaratnam, "Gross distortions in Malaysia's voting system", *Malaysiakini*, 9 May 2013, <http://malaysiakini.com/news/229578> (accessed 4 Jun 2013).

in their political programmes, lost votes. The loss of power in the federal state of Kedah did not come as a surprise, as the PAS parties' governance had been under criticism for quite some time there. Good news for PR was the strengthening of their position in the states they govern, Penang and Selangor. This proves that PR can govern successfully and is stable. Kelantan has been the stronghold of the PAS party for over 20 years, therefore it was to be expected that they would continue to govern there – despite a slight loss of votes. A strategically important success for the PR is that they were able to gain additional seats in federal states previously considered BN strongholds. This includes the fiercely contested state of Johor, which has important symbolic meaning for the UMNO party which was founded here. In Johor, the PR was able to obtain an impressive 28 out of 56 seats. In 2008, they got only six seats. In Perak, it narrowly missed the majority with 28 (out of 59). Gaining eleven seats in the East-Malaysian state of Sabah, where the BN had absolutely dominated until now with 59 out of 60 seats, is also important. Therefore, the PR has created a solid basis for further gains in the future.

The electoral results show that in general, the Malaysian population's mood is changing. In particular, the ethnic Chinese seem to have given a large proportion of their votes to the opposition, first and foremost to the DAP. They don't seem to trust the BN anymore and feel disadvantaged by the government's pro-Malay politics.²⁹ But the Malay population too, who previously remained loyal to UMNO, is changing. An emergent urban middle-class is demanding social reforms, economic liberalisation and modernisation. Additionally, the young generation would like more freedom and better opportunities in the future.

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The Barisan Nasional was aware of this development and employed all its existing advantages during the election campaign. Months before the elections, Najib's government advertised using comprehensive funding programmes and

29 | On election evening, Prime Minister Najib spoke disappointedly of a "Chinese Tsunami".

The government was able to depend on unreservedly positive reporting by the press and most important television and radio stations, which are under their influence.

election gifts³⁰ in order to win the voter's favour. This was particularly popular in rural areas. The government was able to depend on unreservedly positive reporting by the press and most important television and radio stations, which are under their influence. In addition, the Barisan Nasional has considerable resources as well as an experienced electoral campaign apparatus at its command. The opposition, PR, is only strongly represented by the independent media on the internet and social networks.³¹ This benefitted them in urban centres in particular, but they were only able to reach the rural areas with difficulty.

CLAIMS OF ELECTORAL FRAUD

The legitimacy of the election results was questioned with an accusation of electoral fraud. Even before the elections, rumours circulated- of manipulated electoral rolls, vote buying and "illegal" foreign voters abroad, who were given Malaysian identity cards by the government and flown into critical constituencies. During the election, it turned out that the supposedly indelible ink, used to mark the fingers of the voters, was relatively easy to remove. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has refused to recognise the election results and demands an investigation into the irregularities. Pakatan Rakyat submitted a list of 27 constituencies where electoral fraud was suspected, demanding a recount in these constituencies. Additionally, the resignation of the chairman of the electoral commission and his deputy, who were described as the government's henchmen, was demanded. In order to emphasise these demands, the opposition organised nine large demonstrations in the first two weeks after the election, each attended by several thousand people.

30 | As part of BR1M a one-off sum of 500 Malaysian ringgits (around 125 euros) was handed out to all households with a monthly income of less than 3,000 Malaysian ringgits (750 euros).

31 | According to a report by the Malaysian Insider there are 13.6 million Facebook users (48 per cent of the population). "Perception is BN's Biggest Problem says Najib", *The Malaysian Insider*, 3 Jun 2013, <http://themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/perception-is-bns-biggest-problem-says-najib> (accessed 4 Jun 2013).

The Barisan Nasional rejected the claims and invited the PR to submit evidence.³² The demonstrations were declared illegal; however, the police has not intervened as yet. Investigations of claims of sedition have been initiated against several opposition politicians. Even so, public pressure seems to have had an effect: On 1 June, Prime Minister Najib announced that a mixed parliamentary committee would be formed to investigate the work of the electoral commission.



Najib Razak at the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2013: Shortly after the announcement of the final election results, he was once again inaugurated as Malaysian Prime Minister on 6 May 2013. | Source: World Economic Forum (CC BY-NC-SA).

OUTLOOK AND CHALLENGES

Shortly after announcing the election results on 6 May, Najib was again sworn in as prime minister. On 15 May, he presented his cabinet with very few changes. His government coalition is weakened politically. The time of a comfortable two-thirds majority for the BN seems to be over for good. The strong exodus of Chinese voters, but also the loss of votes in urban centres poses a challenge to the BN to

32 | Two of the accredited election monitors, the research institutes, IDEAS und CPPS, in their report dated 8 May 2013, the elections were described as "free, but unfair". Despite deficits, they should be recognised by all parties.

rethink its pro-Malay political course and to aspire to a new national consensus without ethnic discrimination. In order to do this, however, the UMNO needs to reform. It remains to be seen whether the UMNO is prepared to do so. Party leader Najib Rajak must stand for re-election at the next UMNO congress and face up to possible criticism from the traditional wing. The UMNO party statutes changed in 2009 states that party leadership must be directly voted by the member base. If Najib is reconfirmed in office, he will have a strong mandate for his reform politics.

A determined and consistent continuation of the reforms is required in order to successfully master the political, economic and social requirements of the next few years. At the same time it is important to overcome the divisions in society and to attain a national consensus regarding the country's future development. This is not an easy task in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious country such as Malaysia. Ultimately, this will only succeed if both government and opposition are willing to make compromises. Although the political rifts are still deep, there are moderate and open-minded politicians on both sides, in particular amongst the younger generation, who may be willing to be ready to start a dialogue.

Malaysia has experienced rapid economic development in recent years. The macro-economic data is solid: growth rates at an average of five per cent³³, relatively low inflation (2011: 3.1 per cent), moderate national debt (53 per cent of GDP) and a moderate budget deficit of four per cent.³⁴ Even so, with regards to the most important economic indicators, Malaysia is lagging behind in comparison to the so-called "tiger" nations Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea. In order to achieve the aim of becoming a high income nation by 2020, it would be necessary to continuously increase economic growth in the coming years. Besides income levels, other factors are important too: A modern and generally accessible education system, efficient affordable health care system, high environmental standards, efficient modern infrastructure, developed

33 | See World Bank, "Malaysia", <http://worldbank.org/en/country/malaysia> (accessed 18 Jun 2013).

34 | See also The Heritage Foundation, "2013 Index of Economic Freedom: Malaysia", <http://heritage.org/index/country/malaysia> (accessed 18 Jun 2013).

traffic and communication networks and, last but not least, the development and strengthening of democratic and constitutional principles within the legislation. In his first term, Prime Minister Najib profiled himself as Malaysia's reform-friendliest head of state. Now he has the opportunity to reinforce this reputation with tangible results by the next elections.

For the opposition it will be important, in the medium term, to preserve cohesion and to become a stable coalition with compatible programmes. Considering the political differences between the secular, ethnic Chinese-character of the DAP and the Islamic PAS party, this will not be an easy task. However, as a coalition which offers political concepts and solutions beyond ethnic and religious divisions, PR can present itself to voters as a better alternative for government office.

This article was completed on 4 June 2013.