

THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN MALAYSIA IN 2008: CHANGE VS. TRADITION. WITH UNKNOWN VARIABLES

Thomas Knirsch / Stefanie Reher

The Parliamentary Elections on 8 March 2008 marked an important point in the history of Malaysia by turning the established power relations upside down and giving the opposition more political influence than ever before. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's Barisan Nasional (National Front, short BN), which has governed the country since its independence in 1957, still won over 50 percent of the votes, translating into a comfortable majority of 63 percent in parliament. However, the victory was not sufficient to reach the goal of retaining a two-thirds majority and therefore considered a defeat. The opposition, consisting of a rather loose coalition of three very different parties, succeeded not only in winning crucial seats in the national parliament, but also took over the governments in 5 of the 13 states. Though chances of success might be small, de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim even plans to form the federal government by pulling BN members over to his side and completely turn the tide in Malaysian politics.

In order to understand the election results and how they came about, Malaysia's history and the composition of its society have to be taken into consideration. Since independence in 1957, an alliance of several political parties representing different groups of society has continuously ruled Malaysia. The country's party system is based on the prevalent ethnic cleavages, thus most parties were founded by and for the Malay Muslim majority (around 50 percent), the large Chinese minority (around 25 percent), or the smaller Indian minority (7 percent). Ethnic tensions have played a crucial – if not the most important – role in Malaysian politics and other spheres of society throughout history. The BN government always aimed at conflict avoidance by constraining basic freedoms. However, the Chinese and Indian communities have become increasingly angry at the various perceived or real disadvantages they face in the economy, education, and other areas where Malays enjoy privileges conferred on them by the government. This dissatisfaction was one of the factors causing Chinese and Indians to vote for the opposition parties – the Chinese socialist-democratic Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the multiracial democratic People's Justice Party (PKR) – instead of the BN parties representing their communities in the March elections. The most important issues guiding the citizens in their voting decision, however, were economic hardships, most importantly recent price increases in food and petrol, and corruption. Large parts of the population were not satisfied with Badawi's actions after the previous election in 2004, where he and his party won with a large majority. Many of the votes helping the opposition to accomplish such a tremendous success in the 2008 elections were thus protest votes. The alternative for the Malays who usually voted for the largest BN party, the

United Malays National Organization (UMNO), was the Islamist Party Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). Together, the three opposition parties won almost 50 percent of the votes which, however, due to the nature of the "first past the post" electoral system, gave them just over 36 percent of the seats in parliament. Nevertheless, in light of the history of Malaysia's elections and the deficiencies in both electoral system and process, the results must be interpreted as a great success for the opposition, in particular as they won the majority of seats in the state parliaments of Kedah, Kelantan, Penang, Perak, and Selangor.

This change in voting behaviour may indicate two divergent trends within the Malaysian society. The fact that the PKR as a multi-ethnic party received a relatively large part of the votes, and that even Chinese and Indians voted for the Islamic PAS, which during the election campaign mostly disregarded its usual aims to transform Malaysia into an Islamic state and instead tried to appeal to voters of all races, gives the impression that ethnic differences have become less important for a part of the population. Instead, democratic ideas and propositions for a welfare state as advocated by the opposition parties have developed a stronger appeal to them. This change might indicate a shift in value orientations from traditional and authority towards self-direction and emancipative values. On the other hand, a significant proportion of voters gave their support to PAS based on the feeling that UMNO's actions to protect Malay and Muslim interests were not sufficient anymore. Does this mean that, while parts of the population see the importance of ethnic and religious cleavages shrink and give way to democratic and egalitarian ideas, other groups experience an upsurge of religious and traditional values and an increased rejection of liberal and Western thoughts? Or are the results actually to a large extent influenced by the new media which was used much more by the opposition and proved very effective especially among the young and urban voters?

In any case, the political arena has changed, at least for the next months and years. Shortly after the election, the three opposition parties formed the coalition *Pakatan Rakyat* which will try to challenge the BN government from the state level but also in the national parliament, where de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, after aiming to become a Member of Parliament through a by-election in late August, wants to take power by mid-September. Whether he will succeed not only depends on whether he can convince enough members of the BN to switch sides, but also on the outcome of his trial – he has been charged with sodomy, a crime that can entail a long imprisonment in Malaysia. Anwar's supporters have no doubt that his political opponents would welcome a conviction that could possibly prevent a further overturning of Malaysia's politics. As unsure as the outcome of the trial is the future of Malaysian politics. The following months may indicate whether a true two-party system is forming and whether the country has reached a

point in time to give way to the political forces and ideas that have so far been in the opposition.

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