

**The 1995 Malaysian
General Elections**

A Report and Commentary

Edmund Terence Gomez

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I The State of Play

During Malaysia's Ninth General Elections, held on 24–25 April 1995, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front) coalition retained control of the government with one of its most exceptional electoral victories. The election had long been anticipated, with Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad fobbing off election speculation from as early as March 1994. Since 1974, all general elections had been held after around four-year intervals — despite the constitutional allowance for a five-year term — and this was the longest ever term for the BN government before the Prime Minister announced the dissolution of Parliament on 5 April 1995. Thus, for almost a year prior to the elections, all political parties were aware of the likelihood of a snap election. Despite this, most opposition parties were unable to work out an effective campaign strategy to counter the growing popularity that the BN seemed to enjoy among the electorate. The BN eventually went on to win 162 of the 192 parliamentary seats, obtaining 3,862,694 votes in contrast to the 2,075,822 votes secured by the opposition; thus, even though the BN had secured only 65.05 per cent of the popular vote, it obtained 84.3 per cent of the seats in Parliament. At the state level, the BN won 66.88 per cent of the popular vote and 85.8 per cent of the total number of seats in the states where elections were held.

It was obvious that the Prime Minister had dissolved Parliament only after ensuring that the BN had resolved or addressed some of the main problems that had emerged in early 1994 and tarnished the image and credibility of the ruling coalition, particularly that of its dominant partner, Mahathir's United Malays' National Organisation (UMNO). Among the most awkward issues involved was the BN's successful manoeuvrings to gain control of the Sabah state government following the state elections in February 1994. Although the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS, or Sabah United Party) had retained a narrow majority by winning 25 of the 48 state seats in the election, the defection of numerous PBS assemblymen to the BN — some of whom had presumably been bought over — led to the fall of the nine-year-old PBS state government.

The BN government had also been embarrassed by an alleged sex scandal involving the UMNO Youth Head and Chief Minister of Malacca, Rahim Tambi Chik, and a 15-year-old schoolgirl. The announcement by the Attorney-General that the Malacca Chief Minister would not be prosecuted for statutory rape was subject to much criticism from most quarters of society.

Some state governments were also involved in messy land acquisition legalities and protests over huge development proposals. Among the major projects that had aroused much dissension were the M\$17 billion Jerai International Park — shelved in April 1994 after much public pressure — and the M\$60 million Kerpan tiger prawn project in Kedah, as well as a petrochemical plant project in Malacca undertaken by Petronas, the national petroleum corporation.

The BN government also came under severe criticism following disclosures that the son-in-law of the Minister of International Trade and Industry had received shares of two publicly-listed companies. Those shares had been disbursed by the Ministry under its *bumiputera* share allocation scheme. Under pressure, Minister Rafidah Aziz revealed that other recipients included a son of Mahathir, a brother of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, relatives of a deputy minister, and other UMNO politicians. Apart from this, the government was criticized for the massive losses incurred by Bank Negara, the central bank, in the previous two years following speculative activities on the foreign exchange market.

The government's use of the Internal Security Act (ISA) to detain without trial the leaders of a presumably fundamentalist Islamic sect, the Al-Arqam (subsequently banned for propagating deviant Islamic teachings), came under attack by both local and foreign human rights organizations, which viewed the detention as further evidence of the undemocratic use of a rather draconian legislation. Not long after his detention, the Al-Arqam leader, Ashaari Muhammad, confessed over national television that the teachings of his movement were indeed deviant.

The government also had to contend with new forms of social malaise that had emerged, especially among urban Malay teenagers. Popularly known as *bohsia* and *lepak*, the former involved promiscuous and immoral activities, and loitering in public places in the case of the latter.

In many respects, these issues highlighted some of the main themes that would emerge during the election campaign: the repercussions of rapid economic development on society; the interpretation of Islam by political parties and its role in a rapidly developing society; the limited extent of democratization within the country that impeded attempts to ensure accountability within the government; and factionalism within UMNO, which threatened severe reverberations on the economy and society if left unchecked.