
THE 1999 MALAYSIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

Issues, Insults, and Irregularities

Meredith L. Weiss

After 15 months of accusations, demonstrations, and courtroom dramas, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad finally put matters in his country to a vote. He dissolved Parliament on November 11, 1999, then after nominations on November 20 and a whirlwind campaign period, the country's 10th general election was held nine days later. The election was neither entirely free nor entirely fair, but the incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN) government could claim a convincing victory overall. Nonetheless, the results reflected a shift among many voters. The Malay vote was clearly split between Mahathir's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the opposition, especially Party Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). At the same time, despite high levels of mobilization and persistent criticism of the regime, particularly over the preceding two years, the non-Malay vote seems to have persevered in its allegiance to the BN since 1995. Participation in an opposition coalition, the Barisan Alternatif (BA), helped its primary Malay components, PAS and new Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN or Keadilan). However, joining the coalition seems to have hurt the heavily Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP), which probably could have done better on its own, and had little effect for Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), which still failed to win any seats.

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The general election was notable for the fact that, challenged by a reasonably convincing opposition coalition, the BN and UMNO lost a substantial proportion of the vote and control of a second state's government. It was also significant for the issues raised, particularly by the BA; the pivotal role of Islam; the dirtiness of the brief campaign, including claims of impropriety regarding the electoral procedures; and the fact that the outcome really was not all that certain, with many races won by a whisker. Moreover, in the wake of the polls, not only has UMNO been forced to reevaluate its strategies to avoid losing even more support in the next election, but the BA, too, has been assessing its own future as a coalition.

The Results in Brief

While the BN won, UMNO did worse and PAS did much better, with a cohesive opposition coalition and numerous close races stimulating interest and excitement. The polls were for all parliamentary seats in the 13 states and two federal territories, plus for state legislatures in the 11 peninsular states. Overall, the BN garnered 56.5% of the popular vote, substantially less than the 65% it won in 1995 but comparable to its level of support in prior elections (see Table 1). The BN easily retained its two-thirds majority in Parliament with 148 of the 193 seats (about 77%), a decline from the 166 it held previously,¹ plus two-thirds majorities in the legislatures of all states but Terengganu and Kelantan. UMNO won only 72 parliamentary seats (compared with 89 in 1995), while the other BN parties won a combined total of 76. The coalition's only net gain of seats was in Sabah and Sarawak, where it captured five of those previously held by the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and one from the DAP.

For its part, the BA—especially PAS—made significant inroads in Kedah, Perlis, and Pahang, in addition to its near-complete sweep of Kelantan and Terengganu at the federal and state levels. The opposition, however, fared poorly in Penang and Sabah, both of which have a tradition of giving strong support to opposition parties.² While the DAP did better nationwide than it had in 1995 with a net gain of three parliamentary seats, after 30 years of a Malay-led government and Chinese-led opposition, Malays now control both. New contender Keadilan made a decent showing, drawing about 11% of votes overall, though ultimately winning only six parliamentary seats (one of them under a PAS banner) and four state seats. These seats were in Penang, Kelantan, Perlis, Perak, Selangor, Pahang, and Terengganu, with near misses in several other very large constituencies, particularly in Kuala Lumpur and

1. The BN won 162 seats in 1995 then gained four more from other parties.

2. The BA won five of 11 parliamentary seats and just three of 33 state seats in Penang, and PBS won three of 20 seats in Sabah.

TABLE 1 *BN's Percentage Share of Parliamentary Votes and Seats, 1978–99*

	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Seats</i>
1978	57	84
1982	61	86
1986	56	84
1990	53	71
1995	65	84
1999	57	77

SOURCE: Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "The 1999 General Elections: A Preliminary Overview," in *Trends in Malaysia: Election Assessment*, Working Paper in the Trends in Southeast Asia series (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, January 2000), p. 8.

Selangor. The multiracial but mostly Malay party did not make quite so good a showing in terms of votes and seats as its closest counterpart, the now-defunct Parti (Melayu) Semangat '46 (S46), which won 14% of the popular vote in 1990 and 10% in 1995 at the parliamentary level, but Keadilan seems to have had more of a nationwide impact. As for the non-aligned Malaysian Democratic Party (MDP), a splinter party from the DAP, the MDP lost its deposit in all 11 parliamentary and nine state seats it contested. Each candidate must pay a deposit of 5,000 Malaysian ringgit (RM) per federal seat or RM 3,000 per state seat. The deposit is forfeited if the candidate secures less than one-eighth of the votes in the constituency. Most independent challengers also lost their deposits (see Tables 2–4 for results).

The BA's coalition arrangement kept most contests to one-to-one fights, both on the Peninsula and in Sarawak, where the DAP, Keadilan, and State Reform Party (STAR) formed the Sarawak Barisan Alternatif. Coalition members contested against one another in only a handful of seats, generally without seriously splitting the opposition vote. The only exception was Kuala Kurau, a state seat in Perak, where the UMNO candidate won with 6,941 votes, while Keadilan and PAS together garnered 7,273. Sabah-based PBS cooperated, too, contesting only in Sabah so as not to split the opposition vote.³ In fact, in only two other seats, state seat Lunas in Kedah and parliamentary seat Sandakan in Sabah, did a third contestant gain a really significant number of votes. Furthermore, despite some worry among the opposition about post-election party-hopping to the BN, at the time of writing the only defections had been from the BN's Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan)

3. In 1995, PBS contested fruitlessly in Penang, Sarawak, Labuan, and Johore, in addition to Sabah.

TABLE 2 *Seats Won by Party, 1999*

	<i>Party</i>	<i>Parliament</i>	<i>State</i>
Barisan Nasional	UMNO	72	175
	MCA	28	70
	PBB	10	
	MIC	7	
	Gerakan	7	15
	SUPP	7	21
	PBDS	6	
	SNAP	4	
	UPKO	3	
	SAPP	2	
	LDP	1	
	BN Direct	1	
	<i>BN Total</i>	<i>148</i>	<i>281</i>
	Barisan Alternatif	PAS	27
DAP		10	11
Keadilan		5	4
PRM			
<i>BA Total</i>		<i>42</i>	<i>113</i>
	PBS	3	—
<i>Total</i>		<i>193</i>	<i>393</i>

SOURCE: "Senarai keputusan pilihan raya" (List of election results), Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia (Malaysian Election Commission, SPR) home page on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.spr.gov.my/elect99.html/>> [accessed December 23, 1999]; and "General Election '99 Score Chart," *Sun*, December 1, 1999.

Party: on December 2, two Gerakan state assembly members left the party, citing dissatisfaction with the party's leadership.⁴

A number of key leaders from both the BA and BN either lost their seats or just barely held on to them. Most notably, the DAP's Secretary-General Lim Kit Siang and Deputy Chairman Karpal Singh both lost their parliamentary and state bids in Penang. An unprecedented four UMNO cabinet ministers and five deputy ministers lost their seats. Others won with sharply reduced margins, such as Najib Tun Razak, education minister and deputy prime minister—hopeful in the past government, who fended off PAS by only 241 votes.

4. The two announced they would serve as independents, though the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), part of the BN, offered to accept them. Their defection is symptomatic of a larger split within the party, revolving primarily against opposition to party leader and Penang Chief Minister Koh Tsu Koon, and reflects also longstanding rifts between Gerakan and the MCA.

TABLE 3 *Parliamentary Seats Won by Party and State, 1986–1999*

Year	Barisan Nasional				Democratic Action Party				Party Islam Se-Malaysia				S46		PKN	PBS*			Indep.		Total**	
	86	90	95	99	86	90	95	99	86	90	95	99	90	95	99	90	95	99	86	90	86/90	95/99
Perlis	2	2	3	3																	2	3
Kedah	14	14	15	7								8									14	15
Kelantan	12		2	1					1	6	6	10	7	6	3						13	14
Terengganu	8	6	7	0						1	1	7	1		1						8	8
Penang	5	5	8	6	6	6	3	4							1						11	11
Perak	19	19	23	20	4	4		1				2									23	23
Pahang	10	10	11	11																	10	11
Selangor	12	11	17	17	2	3															14	17
K. Lumpur	3	3	6	6	4	4	4	4													7	10
N. Sembilan	5	7	7	7	2																7	7
Malacca	4	4	4	4	1	1	1	1													5	5
Johor	18	18	20	20																	18	20
Labuan		1	1	1															1		1	1
Sabah	15	6	12	17	4											14	8	3	1		20	20
Sarawak	21	21	26	28	1	2	1												2	4	24/27	27/28
<i>Total</i>	148	127	162	148	24	20	9	10	1	7	7	27	8	6	5	14	8	3	4	4	177/180	192/193

SOURCE: Khong Kim Hoong, *Malaysia's General Elections 1990: Continuity, Change, and Ethnic Politics* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1991); Edmund Terence Gomez, *The 1995 Malaysian General Elections: A Report and Commentary* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996).; and "Pilihan Raya 1999—Dewa Rakyat" (1999 general elections—Parliament), SPR home page on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.spr.gov.my/parlimen.html>> [accessed December 23, 1999].

* PBS withdrew from the BN coalition mid-way through the 1990 campaign.

** A national redelineation exercise completed in 1993 increased the number of parliamentary seats from 180 to 192. Sarawak has had additional adjustments.

TABLE 4 *Peninsular State Assembly Seats Won by Party and State, 1986–1999*

Year	<i>Barisan Nasional</i>				<i>Democratic Action Party</i>				<i>Party Islam Se-Malaysia</i>				<i>S46</i>		<i>PKN</i>	<i>Total*</i>	
	86	90	95	99	86	90	95	99	86	90	95	99	90	95	99	86/90	95/99
Perlis	14	14	15	12								3				14	15
Kedah	25	26	34	24		1			3	1	2	12				28	36
Kelantan	29		7	2					10	24	24	41	14	12		39**	43
Terengganu	30	22	25	4					2	8	7	28	2			32	32
Penang	23	19	32	30	10	14	1	1				1			1	33	33
Perak	33	33	51	44	13	13	1	4				3			1	46	52
Pahang	32	31	37	30	1	1	1	1				6	1		1	33	38
Selangor	37	35	45	42	5	6	3	1				4	1		1	42	48
N. Sembilan	24	24	30	32	4	4	2									28	32
Malacca	17	17	22	21	3	3	3	4								20	25
Johor	35	32	40	40	1	3							1			36	40
<i>Total</i>	299	253	338	281	37	45	11	11	15	33	33	98	19	12	4	351	394

SOURCE: Ibid.

* A redelineation exercise completed in 1993 increased the number of state seats (including Sabah and Sarawak) from 447 to 498. State elections are held separately in Sabah and Sarawak. The federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan have only federal elections.

** Berjasa, a Malay-based party previously in the BN, won one seat.

In his case and that of Lembah Pantai UMNO incumbent Shaharizat Abdul Jalil, rumor had it that the BN candidate was losing until boxes of postal votes from military and police personnel arrived to turn the tide. Even Mahathir won by a much smaller margin than in 1995.⁵ Meanwhile, PBS leader Joseph Pairin Kitingan barely retained the Sabah parliamentary constituency of Keningau, keeping his seat by 250 votes. At the state level, the casualties included Terengganu Chief Minister (Menteri Besar, MB), Wan Mokhtar Ahmad (UMNO), and Kedah MB Sanusi Junid (UMNO), who won his seat but renounced the MB post in light of the BN's poor performance in the state.

The BN's majorities were sharply reduced in many constituencies, especially in most seats in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. The shrinking of these margins of victory suggests a substantial shift among urban voters in particular and most obviously in the Klang Valley, where calls for reform had been strongest over the previous 16 months. Voters in this region also probably had the most widespread access to the Internet and other alternative media and so might have been less easily swayed by the BN-controlled mainstream media. Among the more notable tightly contested seats were those in Shah Alam, where Keadilan Youth head Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor narrowed UMNO's majority from almost 41,000 in 1995 to just 1,140 and Bandar Tun Razak, where social activist and academic Chandra Muzaffar shaved the BN component Malaysian Chinese Association's (MCA) margin from 14,735 to 1,224. Also, in two of three parliamentary seats in Perlis, the BA cut the BN's majority by over half.⁶

The BN's proportion of the popular parliamentary vote was much lower in Peninsular Malaysia (about 54%) than in East Malaysia (62%).⁷ This discrepancy was reflected in terms of seats, too: the BN won 71% of Peninsular seats and 93% of East Malaysian seats. Moreover, the BN's results for the Peninsula were skewed by Johor. Second in size only to Selangor, Johor presents something of an anomaly, perhaps because UMNO's machinery is particularly strong there and Anwar never cultivated much of a base in the state. The BN received over 70% of the vote in Johor, plus all parliamentary and state seats—few contests were even close. In contrast, in Selangor, the BN received only 54% of the vote. However, thanks to gerrymandering, which renders Malay votes more potent than those of non-Malays, given the relative sizes of urban and rural constituencies, the BN still posted a clean sweep of

5. In 1995, Mahathir won by 17,226 votes. This time he won by 10,138, defeating non-Kedahan Subky Latif of PAS.

6. Still, PAS lost the third seat, Arau, after having won it in a closely watched 1998 by-election.

7. In Peninsular Malaysia, the BA received about 43% of the vote, while in East Malaysia, the BA and PBS each received about 15%.

all Selangor's parliamentary and state seats. The effects of pro-BN electoral districting and Malaysia's first-past-the-post system were also evident in Negeri Sembilan, where the BN garnered 58% of the vote and every federal and state seat; in Pahang, where the BN won all parliamentary seats with just 52% of the vote; and in Perak, where the BN won 20 of 23 parliamentary seats with only 56% of the vote. On the other hand, helped by the same electoral system attributes, the BA won all the parliamentary seats in Terengganu with just 58% of the vote and all but one in Kelantan with 60% of the vote.⁸

The Economic Crisis, Anwar, and *Reformasi*

The decline in the BN's fortunes can be traced to the Asian economic crisis of 1997–98 and the *Reformasi* movement launched by ex-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998. While the worst is over, the economic recession had political consequences. In particular, the collapse of the Malaysian ringgit to about one-half of its former value prior to Mahathir's imposition of exchange controls in September 1998, plus the plunge and slow recovery of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange, led to debates on proper policy approaches and increased awareness of the country's vulnerability to outside economic forces. At the same time, amid slow financial and corporate restructuring and selective government-led bail-outs, frustration with the regime—and in particular, with apparent cronyism and corruption, even if less rampant than elsewhere in the region—mounted.

Upon his sacking in early September 1998, Anwar capitalized on these and other concerns to foment popular ire against the regime. His *Reformasi* movement—highlighting abuses of the government including repressive laws, financial mismanagement, and executive centralization—captured the imagination especially of urban Malay youths, who initiated a series of demonstrations and fora in the name of *keadilan* (justice). Unprecedented numbers of new members flocked to PAS and to various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and coalitions. Then, in April 1999, Anwar's wife launched Keadilan as the party of *Reformasi*. It quickly attracted hundreds of thousands of members.

Anwar's impact on the polls is hard to gauge, though posters of him—especially of his infamous black eye, received in prison from the then-inspector general of police—abounded and he was the BA's mutually agreed-upon candidate for prime minister. Clearly, his wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, was

8. These figures are derived from Dachlan M. Noer's posting to the Sangkancil mailing list (archived at <<http://www.malaysia.net/lists/sangkancil/1999-12/>>), "Analysis—Parliament.xls," sent via list owner MGG Pillai on December 3, 1999.

elected out of sympathy for his (and her) plight, with her appeals to the public revolving around Anwar's mistreatment. Substantial numbers of voters supported the BA on account of the way Anwar had been treated and what he symbolized in terms of the injustice of the regime and the need for change. For many others, though, especially non-Malays, Anwar probably was not a big draw and perhaps even detracted from their confidence in the coalition. Both before and during the campaign many Malays and non-Malays expressed dissatisfaction with or distrust of Anwar, seeing him as just another opportunistic BN politician who had been thwarted in his quest for power. After all, Anwar was closely associated with the pro-Malay, pro-Islam policies of the 1980s and 1990s that have so disgruntled non-Malays; hence, his multiracial rhetoric rang a bit hollow to some.

Complicating any assessment of the impact of *Reformasi* is the fact that the movement's main accomplishment was mobilizing thousands of either young or previously apathetic citizens. Many of these people could not vote—either they were still too young, or they were among 680,000 who had registered to vote during the April–May 1999 registration exercise but whose names did not yet appear on the electoral rolls as of November. The Elections Commission (EC) claimed that they could not process the new registrants until February 2000, hence shutting them out of the 1999 polls. The registration drive had drawn about three times the usual number of new voters, many probably motivated by the Anwar affair. It was generally presumed that the majority of the 680,000 voters would have supported the opposition. Many more potential voters simply had never registered at all. As Malaysian academic Patricia Martinez mused, “It would be interesting, although perhaps unfeasible, to find out how many of those non-Malays who were pro-BA actually had not registered to vote or could not vote. Voter apathy has been quite widespread over the years among non-Malays, because of cynicism about their power and the electoral process.” She explained that with many significant seats lost by tiny margins, the fact that so many who were now politically conscious could not or had never voted was (and is) quite important.⁹ The vote totals garnered by the BN and the opposition were close enough that, while distribution matters immensely, the 680,000 new registrants alone could have made a big difference—which is why many speculated that Mahathir held the snap elections when he did, rather than waiting until the electoral rolls had been updated.

Finally, it is a perennial dilemma for the opposition that many more people go to their *ceramah* (speeches) than end up voting for their candidates. The opposition now as ever relied heavily on abstract rhetoric of human rights

9. Patricia Martinez, “More than Meets the Eye: More Complex Factors to Explain Election Outcome,” *Aliran Monthly* 19:10 (December 1999), pp. 10–11.

and democracy—the keystones of *Reformasi* and decades of oppositional agitation—though supplementing these demands with charges of *kezaliman* (tyranny) and plentiful evidence of corruption, mismanagement, and the like. The BN made much more concrete and persuasive promises of development, reinforcing these not only by heavy spending during the campaign but also by raising racial fears, concerns about instability or undue foreign influence, and questions about Anwar and the BA's competence.

Issues: Human Rights and Good Governance vs. Development and Stability

With the backdrop of economic recovery on the one hand and *Reformasi* on the other, it was clear from the outset that the key themes of the campaign would be development and stability for the BN and justice and good governance for the BA. By the time he dissolved Parliament and called elections, Mahathir could claim with some credibility to have steered Malaysia out of the economic crisis. The BN marshaled an array of cheerful economic statistics, from stock market growth to the announcement mid-campaign that the country's third-quarter growth rate had topped 8%, to prove its capability. The incumbent government also claimed credit for basically all of national development since independence in 1957, when UMNO and its partners first came to power. Mahathir counterpoised his unorthodox recovery strategies, including capital controls and a currency peg, against the more free market-oriented, IMF-like measures pursued while Anwar was finance minister, and also highlighted the relative economic deprivation of PAS-governed Kelantan. With a generous election-year federal budget (which was never ratified, since Parliament was dissolved too soon after its presentation), speeches and media reports about the BN's economic aptitude, frightening advertisements targeted especially at Chinese businesspeople warning of economic disaster should the BA come to power, and a host of development grants and promises during the campaign, the BN strove to convince voters that only its governance could ensure continued economic growth and prosperity. The BN also stressed the inexperience and disorganization of the BA, suggesting through statements and advertisements that cooperation between PAS and the DAP could not be sustained, that Anwar was unreliable as a leader, and that racial harmony and stability were at stake.

Having never been in power except in poor, rural Kelantan and, from 1959 until 1961, Terengganu, the parties in the BA had a scant record with which to compete against the BN's claims. Helped by academic experts, the BA did make some stabs at debate on economic issues, for instance releasing a proposed budget and statements on the government's controversial bank merger and privatization plans. Indeed, one provision in the BA's proposed bud-

get—the eradication of television-user license fees—was promptly incorporated into the BN's own budget and announced before the government remembered to revise its revenue estimates. Inasmuch as BA candidates dealt with economic issues, however, particularly in their *ceramah*, their focus was more on redistribution than just growth. They explained, for instance, that cronyism, corruption, and nepotism jeopardize economic efficiency, allocating too great a proportion of public funds to wasteful mega-projects and benefiting a narrow elite at the expense of the Malay and non-Malay masses. The BA also promised a monthly wage for workers on agricultural estates, more merit-based affirmative action programs, taxi licenses awarded to individuals rather than companies, and the like, probably appealing more to lower-income voters than to big business interests.

Ultimately, the focus of the BA's campaign was justice, democracy, and good governance (transparency, accountability, separation of powers, and lack of corruption) rather than economic development. BA candidates highlighted such issues as freedom of speech, assembly, and the press; independence of the judiciary, police, and attorney general; and the abolition of laws allowing detention without trial. Their *ceramah* also focused on spanning racial divisions, both from an ideological perspective and as a practical matter—Muslim supporters of PAS, for instance, had to be convinced that it would be “safe” to vote for a Chinese DAP candidate if he or she were the local BA option. This “one nation” message was stressed in *ceramah* to all racial groups. Moreover, not only did some candidates speak in multiple languages,¹⁰ but DAP and Keadilan *ceramah* in particular were likely to have speakers from more than one race and language or dialect. Not only could one *ceramah* thus reach out to several language groups, but as Malacca Keadilan candidate Tian Chua explained, while the BN gives one story to the Malays and another to the Chinese, the BA avoids subterfuge, speaking to all races at once.¹¹

Women's issues were particularly salient to the elections, and not only because UMNO strongly warned Muslim women to safeguard their rights by rejecting PAS. Several months before the elections, a wide range of political parties and NGOs crafted and endorsed the Women's Agenda for Change (WAC), a quite comprehensive document enumerating action steps to be taken to address gender imbalances and biases in areas such as law, labor, and health care. Also, a coterie of women's groups united under the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI) to present a candidate for Parliament, with the aim of not only increasing women's representation in the body, but also

10. For example, Selangor DAP candidate Kannan Thangarasu exhorted voters successively in Tamil, Mandarin, and Malay.

11. Malacca Keadilan candidate Tian Chua speaking at a *ceramah*, Selandar constituency, November 25, 1999.

encouraging women to become more politically aware and involved. The WCI's candidate was Zaitun Kasim, who ran as an independent under the banner of the DAP in Selayang, a parliamentary seat in Selangor. With the support of the other BA parties, Zaitun presented herself as a non-politician and women's activist. Her *ceramah*, though, focused at least as much on other social issues (the environment, uneven development, and so on) as on gender themes. Though she lost in the end, Zaitun made a respectable showing, capturing over 26,000 votes. Virtually alone among opposition candidates, Zaitun received regular and favorable coverage in the English, Chinese, Tamil, and Malay mainstream media, largely due to the novelty of having a women's candidate.

Among the BA's candidates, supporters, and advisors were a number of political neophytes, moved to participate by the *Reformasi* movement and related events. For instance, reform-minded novelist Shahnun Ahmad of PAS, whose 1999 political satire *Shit* provoked furious calls for him to be stripped of his academic position and *sasterawan negara* (literary laureate) title, made his political debut, narrowly defeating cabinet minister Abdul Hamid Othman for a Kedah parliamentary seat. Several other candidates, including three top leaders of Keadilan, were long-time NGO activists who felt sufficiently frustrated with the regime and hopeful about the BA's chances of success to contest. For example, Chandra Muzaffar, head of the International Movement for a Just World and Keadilan deputy president, lost narrowly in Bandar Tun Razak with a platform denouncing cronyism, limitations on personal freedoms, and the politics of fear, and highlighting PAS's record for clean government in Kelantan. Likewise, human rights activist and Keadilan Vice-President Tian Chua campaigned unsuccessfully for social justice, multiracialism, and redistributive policies, losing by a wide margin in Selandar, a parliamentary seat in Malacca. Irene Fernandez, also a Keadilan vice-president as well as director of NGO Tenaganita, contested in Subang in Selangor with similar issues, narrowing the BN's majority but still losing. Moreover, various long-time opposition party members and leaders also stressed their social activist identities, such as the DAP's Teresa Kok, who won in Seputeh in Kuala Lumpur, and PRM President Syed Husin Ali, who lost in Petaling Jaya Selatan in Selangor.

Meanwhile, these and other candidates' campaigns benefited from the participation of NGO activists, both from human rights or community development groups such as Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Voice of the Malaysian people, SUARAM), the All Women's Action Society, and Pusat Komunikasi Masyarakat (Centre for popular communications, KOMAS), and from Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic youth movement, ABIM), Pertubuhan Jamaah Islah Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic reform society, JIM), and similar groups. Quite a number of both Malay and non-Malay university

students also worked on opposition campaigns, while respected academics and professionals (some also involved with NGOs) such as economist Jomo Kwame Sundaram, sociologist Kua Kia Soong, and lawyer Chandra Kana-gasabai participated in BA *ceramah*.

Without reliable public opinion and exit polls, it is impossible to say precisely to what extent the BA's social issues-based campaign was effective among the different racial communities. However, the success of candidates such as Betty Chew—wife of Lim Guan Eng, a DAP politician jailed for his advocacy on behalf of an underaged Malay girl who alleged that she had been raped by then-Malacca Chief Minister Rahim Tamby Chik—suggests that justice concerns were significant, since these issues formed the primary basis and motivation for their campaigns. Also, the fact that a group of NGO activists could join up with a party formed a mere nine months before; campaign on a *keadilan* platform for a brief, frenetic time with limited resources and inexperienced volunteers; yet garner tens of thousands of votes, suggests that social issues were critical for many voters, particularly in the Klang Valley. On the other hand, the rather dismal performance of the opposition in Sarawak and Sabah—where the BN has long lured support by contrasting Sabah's low growth rates when under opposition rule with those of BN-held Sarawak—hints that particularly when coupled with a pro-BN media blitz and promises of specific benefits, the BN's economic promises will win the votes of non-Malays and non-Muslim *bumiputera* (Malays and other native groups).

The Rise of PAS: Do Malaysians Want an Islamic State?

As indicated by PAS's surge in seats and takeover of Terengganu, Islam was a key voting issue. It is impossible to separate out to what extent Islam *per se* was what drew voters to PAS, and to what extent it was the party's *keadilan* theme and the events since Anwar's sacking. This distinction is especially cloudy since UMNO, too, stressed its Islamic credentials and programs in areas in which PAS posed a particular threat. However, since its formation, Keadilan has grown more Islamic in image (separating women and men at *ceramah*, for instance, and encouraging at least one bare-headed Malay female candidate to cover up) and all of its successful candidates were Muslim Malays. Moreover, even before *Reformasi*, PAS's chances were good in Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis as well as in Kelantan. Hence, Islam—defined by PAS and Keadilan as non-racialist, though a focus on Islam is a focus on Malays—was probably the deciding factor in many of PAS and Keadilan's victories. At the same time, Malays from various states are not all alike: theocratic yearnings still seem to sway more Malays in the eastern and northern states than in consistent UMNO strongholds such as Johore.

Regardless, Malay (and non-Malay) voters may well have voted for PAS as a vote *against* UMNO and the BN rather than *for* PAS's Islamization program. As academic and NGO activist Farish Noor suggested, "This vote of frustration against UMNO is not necessarily a vote of endorsement for the Islamist agenda of PAS. PAS should not be led into thinking that the massive show of support it has received is in any way an indication that the Malaysian public endorses its controversial and problematic project of creating an Islamic state in Malaysia."¹² Aware of this distinction, PAS agreed to defer its Islamization program for the sake of the BA, so the BA's common manifesto, "Toward a Just Malaysia," makes no mention of an Islamic state. As the only peninsular opposition party with an actual record of recent government, PAS styled itself as a model of clean, transparent, and tolerant policy-making and administration. PAS and its BA partners were at pains to enumerate the concessions PAS had so far made to non-Muslims in Kelantan, for instance, such as being more efficient and acquiescent than UMNO in sanctioning construction of statues of Buddha or removing obstructions hindering Chinese schools. In short, at least outside the east coast states in which the party was already strong on account of its Islamic principles, PAS's *ceramah* and other statements were not so much about *hudud* (Islamic criminal code) laws and the like as about more general *Reformasi* issues.

The recent approach of some PAS leaders, however, especially Kelantan MB Nik Aziz Nik Mat, frightened Malay and non-Malay voters alike. Nik Aziz questioned, for instance, whether women should work outside the home if their husband can provide for them, and PAS introduced a controversial apostasy bill in Parliament shortly before the elections. During the campaign, the BN played up these remarks and policies to dissuade voters from supporting PAS, insisting that the party's secular "justice" approach was just an electoral ruse. The BN also tried to sway voters by practical considerations, offering financial inducements to support UMNO instead of PAS. However, these lures failed. As "an UMNO veteran" grumbled after the election, "It is difficult to reason why despite the people in the state thirsting for development in the 10 years under PAS, they decided to reject the chance to get their needs fulfilled. . . . [It is] as though the roads and poverty eradication projects are of no consequence to them."¹³

With PAS now in power in Terengganu, evaluating how far the party will press an Islamist agenda remains a complicated task. The PAS government promptly moved ahead toward greater Islamization, most controversially by

12. Farish A. Noor, "Malaysian Elections 1999: A Shift in the Political Terrain," *AsiaSource*, December 1, 1999, on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.asiasource.org/>> [accessed December 1, 1999].

13. Quoted in "Unanswered Questions on BN's Failure in Kelantan," Bernama wire service, November 30, 1999.

banning gambling and restricting the sale of alcohol in the state as well as announcing plans—from which they quickly backtracked—for a *kharaj* tax (a land tax levied against non-Muslims). Offended by these innovations, given the BA's secular manifesto, the DAP threatened to withdraw from the coalition. Nonetheless, these new taxes are partially to compensate for one of Abdul Hadi Awang's first acts as MB, fulfilling a campaign promise by curtailing road tolls in the state. Protest against high tolls—a very basic, economic issue—was a significant *Reformasi* issue, especially among non-Malays, who held vehement anti-toll protests earlier in the year. In the same vein, the PAS government also lifted a ban on pig rearing imposed by the BN state government a decade ago. This concession carries particular symbolic value in light of the Nipah virus epidemic, which struck Chinese-run pig farms in Negeri Sembilan in early 1999, killing over 100 people, and the resultant debate over whether pig farming should be allowed at all in a majority-Muslim country.

Whatever PAS's intentions, the party's electoral gains could prompt UMNO to escalate its own Islamization programs and rhetoric in an attempt to maintain Malay support. Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin denies that UMNO will challenge PAS via Islam.¹⁴ However, the threat of PAS is largely credited with having spurred UMNO's policy of *penyerapan nilai-nilai Islam* (absorption of Islamic values) since the early 1980s. Also, aside from the symbolic blow of having lost a second Malay state to the opposition, on account of the state's enormous wealth, especially from oil and gas, UMNO will not easily give up on recapturing Terengganu. Particularly since UMNO coerces support for the BN at the state level by withholding federal funds—a threat to which Terengganu is now perhaps less vulnerable—the case could raise important questions of states' rights vis-à-vis the federal government.

Whose Vote Swung?

Many votes swung because of *Reformasi* and the issues the movement raised, and many because of a renewed commitment to Islam, whether in support of theocracy or as a basis for a more clean, accountable government. At the same time, many votes stayed put or gravitated toward the BN as the guarantor of stability and prosperity. The question is, whose votes changed? Overall, the Malay vote split between PAS and UMNO while East Malaysian votes swung toward the BN, but non-Malay votes had already shifted toward the BN in 1995. Then, both the MCA and Gerakan enjoyed a surge in fortunes, largely at the expense of the DAP. In 1999, while fewer non-Malay

14. Sharanjit Singh, "UMNO Will Not Go the PAS Way," *New Straits Times*, December 5, 1999.

voters shifted back to the opposition than the BA had expected, some clearly did. Moreover, as suggested by the split in Gerakan immediately after the polls, not only may the BN not be so cohesive as it once was, plagued as it is by discontent with certain top leaders, but not everyone who voted for the BN may be all that convinced and committed. The BN's threats and fear tactics were hardly tailored to attract staunch support, but rather to promote the BN as the lesser of two evils. In fact, the primarily peninsular non-Malay BN parties—MCA, Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and Gerakan—did no better than in 1995, and the MCA actually lost two parliamentary seats.

Indeed, the proposition that the Chinese vote swung firmly toward the BN is belied by a close examination of the results. For instance, the DAP defeated the MCA incumbent in Bukit Mertajam, a Penang parliamentary seat with a 67% Chinese population. Non-Malay votes also allowed the DAP to recapture Penang parliamentary seat Nibong Tebal (population 47% Chinese, 16% Indian) and the 70% Chinese state seat of Pasir Bedamar in Perak, both from Gerakan. Still, the DAP has been criticized for its poor communications and ground work, and especially for not doing enough to quell non-Malays' fears about collaboration with PAS. Together with widespread concern for economic rather than social issues, these weaknesses help account for the lack of a substantial swing toward the BA among non-Malays. Regardless, even without precise data to confirm who voted for whom, it is safe to conclude that Deputy PM Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was overstating his case when he asserted, "The Chinese in Malaysia now only support the government."¹⁵ However, it is true that among opposition parties, PAS received a far higher share of votes than in 1995 and the DAP a significantly smaller share. In other words, the strength of Chinese support for the opposition has slipped more in relation to the Malay opposition vote than in relation to the BN.

Outside the Peninsula, though, the story changes. In Sabah, while PBS has attempted to style itself as a multiethnic party, particularly since the UMNO's entrance into the state after PBS's defection to the opposition during the 1990 elections, the party has been increasingly pushed into a Kadazan (Dusun) niche. It appears to have been a section of the Kadazan vote, together with at least some Chinese, which swung this time away from PBS and toward the BN, continuing a trend confirmed in the March 1999 Sabah state elections. Not only did *Reformasi* and the Anwar factor indisputably have much less resonance in Sabah and Sarawak than on the Peninsula, but increasing federal centralization and Muslim *bumiputera* dominance over the years, coupled with electoral redistricting to create more Muslim *bumiputera*-majority seats

15. Quoted in "UMNO Is Known to Change," *Asiaweek*, December 10, 1999.

and the government's linking of development funds to support for the BN, has severely handicapped alternative parties.¹⁶

The BN's gains in Sabah show that the coalition has consolidated its position in the state, not just among Muslim *bumiputera*. For instance, Bernard Dompok, head of the BN-member United Pasokmomogun Kadazan Organization (UPKO), won the parliamentary seat of Kinabalu, which has a 60% non-Muslim *bumiputera* majority. Just last March, Dompok, the last chief minister of Sabah, had been toppled from his state seat of Moyog, in the Penampang parliamentary constituency. Moreover, Philip Lasimbang of UPKO recaptured racially mixed Penampang for the BN; Dompok had been defeated by PBS there in 1995. Even in Keningau, with a population almost three-fourths non-Muslim *bumiputera*, PBS leader Joseph Pairin Kitingan barely kept his seat, and the PBS's majority was also reduced in Bandau, which also has over 70% non-Muslim *bumiputera*. While the PBS kept 71% Chinese Tanjung Aru (the most heavily Chinese constituency in the state), proving it is not just Kadazans who support the party, in general, PBS has been increasingly racialized. Even so, it is being threatened by the Kadazan BN component, UPKO: the two Kadazan-majority seats the PBS won have by far the highest non-Muslim *bumiputera* majorities in Sabah, while the party lost two seats with about 60% non-Muslim *bumiputera* populations.

As for Sarawak, while the BN won all the seats, no real swing was apparent. The results were very much in line with other recent outcomes there. The BN and specifically non-Peninsular parties solidly dominated. Notably, though, in 11 of the 13 seats in which Keadilan contested in Sarawak, the party made a respectable showing. Likewise, the DAP garnered quite a lot of votes in the seven seats for which it contested, especially in Bintulu (a racially mixed seat the DAP won in 1995), Miri, and Sibü. These results suggest that at least some voters were keen to change the regime or at least introduce more of an opposition, as was also suggested by the DAP's first-ever win of three seats in the 1996 Sarawak state elections.¹⁷

A Very Messy Fight

Confusing any analyses of what the results really indicate about support for the BN is the nature of the electoral campaign. Both Mahathir and the opposition warned that the 1999 elections would be Malaysia's dirtiest yet. They

16. See Francis Loh Kok Wah, "Understanding Politics in Sabah and Sarawak: An Overview," *Kajian Malaysia* 15:1-2 (January/December 1997), pp. 1-14; Khong Kim Hoong, *Malaysia's General Elections 1990: Continuity, Change, and Ethnic Politics* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1991); and Edmund Terence Gomez, *The 1995 Malaysian General Elections: A Report and Commentary* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996).

17. See Michael Goldman, "Contemporary Chinese Politics in Sarawak: A View from Kuching and Sibü," *Kajian Malaysia* 15:1-2 (January/December 1997), pp. 84-147.

were right: threats by the BN and mudslinging by both sides kept the campaign nasty. Starting from nomination day, the BN took out a series of full- and half-page advertisements in all the mainstream newspapers, while television and electronic media also unambiguously and constantly promoted the BN. This media barrage suggested, among other themes, that only the BN could ensure stability, that a BN loss would bring riots, that the BA was comprised of a bunch of hoodlums and vandals, that foreign powers were funding the BA campaign, that Anwar was not really a good Muslim, that Wan Azizah did not trust Anwar, and that Chinese support for the DAP would usher in PAS rule and the erosion of Chinese cultural rights. The BN further played up racial fears by repeatedly claiming, "a vote for the DAP is a vote for PAS"; decrying PAS's promotion of *hudud* law and Nik Aziz's saying there could be a Chinese PM under PAS rule; suggesting that the DAP would end the system of *ketuanan Melayu* (constitutionally guaranteed Malay special rights); and insinuating that by dint of its involvement alongside Israelis in Socialist International, the DAP was a tool of Zionist Jews. The media also reported a string of defections by Keadilan members to UMNO, though Keadilan claimed many of these people had never been members. Supplementing this attack were risqué videos of Anwar, mysteriously distributed at bus stops and elsewhere, and a fake issue of *Harakah*, PAS's newsletter.

The BA was not completely innocent, of course. It spread its share of slander, though with less reach and impact than the BN's. For instance, photos of Mahathir's wife being kissed on the cheek by another man (presented as inappropriate for a Muslim woman), as well as allegations of womanizing by various UMNO candidates, made the rounds of pro-BA, Internet-based mailing lists. A patently false letter from Mahathir to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, seeking closer ties between Malaysia and Israel as well as American and Israeli funding for UMNO, was also circulated on the Internet and at BA *ceramah*. Moreover, in an attempt to beat the BN at its own game, the BA ran two advertisements in the *Star* and others in the Chinese press. One of the BA's advertisements specifically refuted the BN's media attack, showing a pile of anti-BA press clippings, asking, "Are these Malaysian values?" and urging voters to "Make Malaysia decent again. Vote with your conscience."¹⁸ Primarily though, given the BN's control of the mainstream print and electronic media, opposition supporters relied on alternative media, particularly the Internet, as they had since the outbreak of *Reformasi*. Pro-BA websites like Laman Reformasi, Reformasi Nasional,

18. *Star*, November 28, 1999, p. 57. The advertisements in the *Star* were heavily edited and buried in the back of the paper, while others were rejected altogether.

and freeMalaysia provided alternative news coverage, as did print media such as *Eksklusif* and PAS's *Harakah*.

Other dirty tricks abounded. For instance, BA-bashing posters appeared either showing the DAP's Lim Kit Siang as PAS's candidate for prime minister or deputy prime minister. Press statements and Internet reports from the BA warning that BN youth would wreak havoc while wearing BA T-shirts were rife, though unsubstantiated. Minor incidents of violence dotted the campaign, such as fights between BN and BA campaign workers, though the threatened riots never materialized. Meanwhile, as the BA screened videos on police brutality, the police and armed forces made themselves visible throughout the campaign. Their presence and their attentiveness to *ceramah* by BA candidates such as Tian Chua may have served to reinforce fears of instability should the BA win.

High Turnout, Close Races, and Plenty of Grouses

Despite fears of unrest, with election fever at such a high pitch for so long, turnout was high, both for campaign events and for the polls themselves, with 71% voting. Indeed, some of the most hotly contested seats had particularly high turnout rates and very slight margins of victory. For instance, in Sik in Kedah, Shahnouh Ahmad of PAS won by 478 votes, with a turnout rate of 82%. Similarly, PAS won in Bukit Besi, a state seat in Terengganu, with about a 1% margin of victory and with 84% turnout. If not for a spate of comparably narrow losses, the BA could have made further inroads in all states and possibly taken control of at least a couple more states' governments.

Many constituencies reported quite high numbers of spoiled ballots. Nationwide, the rate was about 2%. In close races, the number of invalid ballots often exceeded the margin of victory, and some seats with narrow margins had particularly high levels of spoiled ballots.¹⁹ In fact, many of the seats with high numbers of spoiled ballots had similarly high numbers in 1995, and no clear pattern was evident among the seats with especially high rates, except that on average, rates were lower in East Malaysia. Many of these ballots may have been purposely spoiled as a sign of protest from voters unhappy with all the candidates on offer. Nonetheless, the prevalence of constituencies in which the number of invalid ballots may have altered the result prompted cries of malfeasance from the BA. Fanning these sentiments were charges on election day that, for instance, the box to check for the opposition candidate was waxed to prevent its being easily marked on some ballots, or

19. For instance, in Rasah, a parliamentary seat in Negeri Sembilan, 3.1% of ballots were spoiled and the MCA won by just 2.2%.

that there was a pre-printed stroke in one party's box (Mahathir said in PAS's box and Keadilan said in the BN's) so a vote for the other would spoil the ballot.²⁰

In addition to suspicion over the cause of spoiled ballots, independent monitoring groups, supplemented by a host of individual complainants, claimed other significant problems with the conduct of the polls. Earlier in the year, a group of 42 NGOs had formed the Malaysian Citizens' Election Watch (Pemantau), a nonpartisan group for voter education and election monitoring. Pemantau documented complaints and problems before and during the campaign and elections. Also, though the government and Elections Commission (EC) denied any need for outside observers, a small number of election monitors came during the campaign from the Asian Network for Free Elections and the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.

The most contentious of the issues raised was the exclusion of the 680,000 newly registered voters from the electoral lists. Actually, at least some of these individuals went to their polling stations anyway and found that their names *were* on the electoral rolls. At the same time, many voters' names were missing on one roll but listed on a different version. In other words, an untold number of eligible voters probably gave up on finding their names on the rolls and thus did not vote. Still other voters arrived at the polling station and were told they had already voted. In addition, the perennial problems of "phantom voters" (foreign nationals or other non-voters paid to vote in the name of deceased or fictitious citizens), claims of coercion or other impropriety in postal voting, voters involuntarily shifted from their usual constituency, and all sorts of missing or duplicated names and identity card (IC) numbers resurfaced with this election. One rather bizarre case reported, for instance, was the registration of hundreds of voters with sequential IC numbers beginning with 160, all in Mahathir's constituency of Kubang Pasu in Kedah.²¹ Furthermore, the BN was alleged to have spent far more than the legal limits of RM 30,000 per state seat and RM 50,000 per parliamentary seat.²² Not only were the BN's media and roadside advertisements undoubt-

20. See Keadilan Vice-President Marina Yusof's December 10, 1999, press statement, "Bukti kukuh tentang penipuan Pilihanraya" (Firm proof of electoral fraud), available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.keadilan.org/kenyataan/marina_101299_m.html> [accessed December 23, 1999], or S. Retna and Ferida Abd Kudhus, "Better than in 1995, Says Dr. M," *Sun*, December 1, 1999.

21. See Amir Muhammad's posting to the Sangkancil mailing list, "Undi hantu in kubang pasu?" (Phantom voters in Kubang Pasu, November 28, 1999, archived at <<http://www.malaysia.net/lists/sangkancil/1999-11/>>].

22. Parties must fund their own campaigns. However, aside from its own substantial funds and those of its wealthy supporters, the BN has benefited immensely during elections from its access to government machinery and perennial control of federal funds.

edly costly, but their *ceramah* sometimes included concerts, free food, and the like. Moreover, a number of candidates and voters have levied charges of vote-buying by the BN, claiming voters were offered as little as RM 5 in some areas—but more commonly RM 50 or so—for their vote. Launching what may well be a torrent of cases, on December 3, BA candidate Jeyakumar Devaraj filed a police report alleging that his opponent, MIC President Samy Vellu, had threatened voters and brought in outsiders to vote in Sungei Siput in Perak.

These charges have no doubt heightened popular disillusionment among voters toward both the legitimacy of the Mahathir government and the electoral system as a whole. However, those voters most aware of and incensed by these issues are likely already to have been opposition supporters, anyway. It was the alternative, pro-BA media as well as generally anti-BN NGOs, including Pemantau, that publicized allegations and evidence of electoral misconduct. These sources primarily reach voters already cynical enough to look outside government-controlled channels for information.

Interpretations and Predictions

In short, the 1999 Malaysian general elections were quite a spectacle. With the BN monopolizing the famous “3Ms” (money, media, and government-owned machinery) even more blatantly than previously, the elections could hardly be termed fair. With so many voters either excluded from the rolls or “phantom voters,” not to mention widespread threats, the elections were not very free, either. Mahathir’s satisfied post-elections pronouncement that “clearly, Barisan Nasional is still the party of choice of the people of Malaysia”²³ is a bit of an overstatement. Clearly, many, perhaps most, Malaysians do still support the BN. For the rest, however, their real preferences are obscured rather than revealed by these elections, with Mahathir’s grip on the Malay heartland especially dubious. In fact, Mahathir’s control even of his own party is suspect. The UMNO Supreme Council’s resolution in January 2000 that the top two posts within UMNO should not be contested at the party polls scheduled for May led to protests even from long-time party stalwarts. Ultimately, the no-contest ruling—which Mahathir insisted was only advice, to be taken or not—was relaxed, ushering in a challenge from the supposedly reluctant, but certainly tenacious, Tengku Razaleigh.

For the time being, the impact of issue-based campaigns and the stress on multiracial coalition-building will not simply disappear. Candidates such as the PRM’s Syed Husin Ali and the Women’s Candidacy Initiative’s Zaitun Kasim made it clear that winning a seat was never really their chief or only aim—the issues are what matter, so they will continue their advocacy efforts

23. Quoted in Retna and Ferida, “Better than in 1995.”

regardless. Moreover, the parties that fared poorly will be encouraged to reform. UMNO's embarrassment will no doubt provoke some soul-searching and modifications. The party is now in a bind: more dependent on non-Malay parties in the BN for the coalition's strength, UMNO may feel obliged to make additional concessions to non-Malays to keep their support, but doing so may alienate even more Malay voters. As Najib posited, "The result of the general election is shocking, but it is an appropriate wake-up call. . . . We must realise that it is not impossible for UMNO to be defeated." He explained that UMNO planned to reach out more to the grassroots and install new programs to woo the younger generation and intellectuals.²⁴ The downfall of long-time leaders such as Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh could promote much-needed internal reform and rejuvenation in the DAP, as well. With Lim having resigned as party secretary-general in the wake of the elections, perhaps in its search for new leaders and fresh ideas, the DAP may promote some of its successful, often more constituency service-oriented, younger, and/or female members.

It is not clear what will become of the BA. Cooperation between the DAP and PAS continues to be difficult to deepen and sustain. After the DAP's somewhat disappointing performance in 1990, Lim Kit Siang explained that the party had made a choice to work in coalition even though it would cost the DAP some seats. After an even worse showing more or less on its own in 1995, the DAP again took the gamble of linking up with its fellow opposition parties, only to be marginalized and attacked. As a partner with PAS, the DAP was constantly on the defensive since, especially thanks to BN reminders, Chinese voters really did fear that voting for the DAP would usher in a repressive Islamic state, notwithstanding all PAS and the DAP's assurances. Moreover, the core of the BA coalition clearly was PAS and Keadilan. In some mostly Malay constituencies, for instance, only those two parties' flags (and perhaps some for PRM) were displayed, while the DAP seemed hesitant to hang PAS flags too prominently at DAP events.

If the BA does cohere and contest again in the next elections, it will need to do more to prove its solidarity. In addition to substantive negotiations about policies and goals, the coalition may choose to adopt a common symbol—there was no time to settle upon one this time around—and may opt to register as a single entity, as the BN has done. Also, if the BA is to present itself as truly unified, BA candidates should probably all run as such and not as representatives of a particular party. In 1999, only a handful of candidates touted themselves as from the BA more than from a component party. Regardless, with Malays dominating both the government and the opposition,

24. "Election a 'Wake-Up Call' for Malaysia's Ruling Party: Minister," *Agence France Presse*, December 5, 1999.

non-Malays may be losing some political clout, not because their parties have done worse but just because PAS has done so much better.

As for the course of the *Reformasi* movement that made these polls so crucial, being able to participate in the electoral process (for those duly registered) has no doubt eased popular frustrations to some extent, however unfair the elections may have been. With hardly any violent tradition to speak of, dramatic riots and coups as in Indonesia are unlikely, and even a repeat of 1998–99's street demonstrations would be hard to sustain. Chances are that despite mutterings in UMNO and the broader public against him, Mahathir will remain in office until he dies or chooses to leave, with the latter an increasingly unlikely prospect. UMNO will become ever more Islamic with PAS so obviously the BN's chief rival, but under the openly racialized format of the BN, UMNO will remain more an openly Malay chauvinist party than PAS, as the latter will presumably maintain its non-racial stance. As for Keadilan, with at least some leaders now in office, the party will probably persist rather than its members returning to UMNO (from whence most of them came).

In sum, the various opposition parties will no doubt continue to whittle away the BN's majority in Parliament, with a social issues agenda gradually boosting the fortunes of secular opposition parties, especially in urban areas. However, politics will remain racialized so long as the BN struggles to retain its dominance. The only way the political system will really change is if political norms develop such that even Muslim dominance is not translated implicitly as Malay dominance and racial fears can no longer be used to prevent voters from choosing along abstract social issue-based lines. However, while it seemed for a time before the elections that politics was truly becoming less communal, the rhetoric and results of the elections belie that impression. Clearly, racial divisions run too deep to be eroded so quickly, though non-ethnic issues may gradually gain ascendance.