

BN risks post-polls protests over electoral fraud

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Malaysia faces the risk of public protests over the accuracy of results from the May 5 national election after an opposition-backed group cited evidence of vote buying and bias by the official ballot oversight agency.

NONEThe Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, known as Bersih, has captured vote-buying on video and received complaints ranging from improper electoral rolls to government abuse of state-run media, according to co-chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan (left).

The group, whose protests in recent years have drawn thousands of people onto Kuala Lumpur's streets, has yet to decide on organising demonstrations, she said this week.

A contested result between Prime Minister Najib Razak's ruling coalition and Anwar Ibrahim's opposition alliance threatens to spark protests in a country that has never seen a transfer of power since independence from Britain in 1957.

A tight finish would be the worst outcome for Malaysian stocks because it would lead to policy paralysis and may end Najib's tenure, Bank of America Merrill Lynch analysts said this week.

"Anything over a 15-to-20 seat victory margin will lead to suspicion - the race is that close," said Bridget Welsh, associate professor of political science at Singapore Management University, who has edited two books on Malaysian politics. "You're going to see people on the streets" if election observers produce solid evidence of fraud, she said.

NONEThe Election Commission has cleaned up the electoral roll, allowed overseas voters to cast ballots via mail, appointed groups to monitor the poll and will use indelible ink for the first time, according to a government spokesperson who is not authorised to be named. The opposition is casting doubt on the fairness of the electoral system to prepare an excuse if they lose the election, the spokesperson said by email.

Najib, 59, heads the 13-party BN, which has controlled more than 60 percent of seats in Malaysia's parliament since its formation after 1969 race riots. He took

over from former prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi about a year after the 2008 election, when the ruling coalition's seat total dropped by about a third.

Anwar, 65, leads an ideologically disparate alliance that includes a Chinese-majority party advocating secular government and an Islamic party that seeks to implement hudud punishments like stoning and amputation. The parties have rallied around a platform aimed at eliminating corruption and ending racial preferences for ethnic Malays in place since 1971.

Anwar's criticism

Anwar and other opposition politicians attended protests last year organised by Bersih, which says it has no political affiliation. The group's one-day demonstrations in each of the past two years prompted police to fire tear gas and detain hundreds of protesters.

"They have not shown themselves to be independent," Ambiga said by phone on April 29, referring to the Election Commission. "It's a very close, hotly-contested election, and that's when you need the referee to be really fair."

NONEAnwar (left) in a statement yesterday urged "patriotic Malaysians" to gather evidence of voter fraud and back him to "exorcise this country from the demons of BN and the Election Commission."

The Election Commission has no power to investigate vote-buying claims, which fall under the authority of police and the anti-corruption agency, according to Kamaruddin Mohamed Baria, the body's secretary. He urged groups to produce evidence of any irregularities and welcomed Bersih's criticism of the commission.

"If everything is perfect, there must be something really wrong with us," Kamaruddin told reporters yesterday in Putrajaya, outside of Kuala Lumpur. "It's good that they have highlighted we are not perfect."

Malaysia last experienced post-election turmoil in 1969 when hundreds were killed in Sino-Malay racial violence, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency and suspend parliament for more than a year. Both Anwar and Najib have condemned pre-election violence.

Malaysia's king, a position with a five-year term that rotates among nine of the country's 13 states, is empowered to appoint a prime minister "who in his judgment is likely to command the confidence of the majority" of lawmakers, according to the constitution. The premier must be elected.

Young voters

Malaysia's electoral rolls have swelled to 13.3 million, a 22 percent increase from the last election, according to Election Commission data. Voters aged 21 to 29 make up 19 percent of the electorate in the nation of 29 million people, compared with 14 percent in 2008. Polls will be open from 8am to 5pm on May 5.

While Najib says his coalition can regain the two-thirds parliamentary majority it lost in 2008, his party is bracing for a closer contest.

An easing of restrictions on free speech and assembly that were common during Mahathir Mohamad's 22-year rule that ended in 2003 have made elections more competitive, said Khairy Jamaluddin, who heads the youth wing of Najib's party.

NONE "We accept the fact after 2008 that we have become a modern democracy, in a sense that controls that were typical during Mahathir's era are not applicable anymore," Khairy (right), a son-in-law of former premier Abdullah and who is standing in the election, said in an interview in March.

"As such, you cannot expect a victory margin of 66 percent and above."