

## **Post-GE13, back to the drawing board for both sides**

**MalaysiaKini.com**

**May 10, 2013**

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COMMENT Finally the general election is over. For politicians and analysts, the work of number crunching, deciphering the results and trying to understand the choices made by voters is just beginning.

Some conclusions are easy to arrive at. Firstly, despite a skewed electoral playing ground and the rolling out of more than RM2.6 billion worth of financial and other incentives to voters, the BN could not improve on its 2008 performance.

Although it regained power in one state and has a comfortable majority at parliamentary level, its share of state and parliamentary seats has been substantially reduced. Had a fair election prevailed, it would have been consigned to the opposition benches.

In fact, BN lost the popular vote count nationwide by a substantial margin. In most, if not all electoral systems found in the world, it would have been booted out of office. In our case, it came dangerously close to it.

BN still in a denial mode

BN chief Najib Abdul Razak blamed a 'Chinese tsunami' for the BN's lacklustre performance. This was a knee-jerk overreaction to the strong Chinese voter support given to the DAP and his disappointment with it.

NONEIt can also be read as an attempt to tap into Malay public sympathy ahead of the backlash expected from Umno conservative forces anticipated to come together to demand his resignation for failing to deliver his highly publicised target of a two-thirds majority for Umno and the BN.

Other commentators, including Umno ones, have noted that the Umno and BN results point to rejection not just from the Chinese but also from large segments of other voters, including Malays.

Efforts had been made by Najib to woo just about every racial segment of the population. In particular, the Malay-dominated rural, civil service and police and military constituencies were targeted with perks and handouts timed for the election.

For several months leading up to voting day, government and Malay media had also given prominence to Dr Mahathir Mohamad and other conservative Malay leaders playing up Malay and Muslim insecurities and emphasising the importance of preserving Malay and Islamic dominance.

Their objective was aimed clearly at bringing about the eclipse, if not the decimation, of Mahathir's nemesis, Anwar Ibrahim's PKR and its multi-ethnic agenda of change, equality and reform.

NONETHat these failed to work was mainly due to demographic, occupation and spatial changes in the Malay population and widespread disapproval of the BN's record of corruption, cronyism, and bad governance.

Attempts to stampede the majority Malays into rejecting the opposition by raising racial and religious sentiments were only partially successful with young, better educated and urbanised Malays joining their non-Malay counterparts in opting for change - even if it was for a relatively untried, little tested and potentially unstable new coalition.

It is telling that despite a massive media campaign touting the stability of the BN and demonising the divisions of the opposition, the electorate in the urbanised states of Selangor, Penang and other urban areas preferred to vote for the deep blue sea rather than the familiar.

In the end, the tsunami was not a Chinese one but a Malaysian urban and middle class one with voters who were better informed, considerably less influenced by the government and BN-friendly mass media and less susceptible to subtle threats and not so subtle incentives, who opted to vote against the BN.

Pakatan's dilemma

For the opposition, although they had their best result ever in winning the overall popular vote, both at federal and state levels and in making some inroads into formerly unassailable BN strongholds, Putrajaya was too far a reach this time.

Predictably, and with justification, Pakatan Rakyat has blamed electoral fraud and irregularities as the main reason for its failure to win power.

NONEPakatan leader Anwar has refused to accept the election results, especially in closely contested constituencies, and announced that a special investigative team from the three opposition parties will work with electoral reform group Bersih to gather information and proof that the election was neither free nor fair.

Even if proof of election fraud and irregularities is produced, there is no way the opposition or any other force can persuade the Election Commission to overturn the outcome of the election or order fresh elections in those seats.

Pakatan needs to reconcile itself to the fact that it went into GE13 knowing and accepting the obstacles the ruling party would deploy to stymie the opposition, including possibly seeking to deny the handing over of power even if Pakatan won the general election fairly and squarely.

For Pakatan to keep complaining about the way the election was stolen provides BN the justification to label it a loser intent on inciting an Arab-style spring mass revolt and bent on seizing power illegally.

It will be better for Pakatan to take the high ground by accepting the outcome; and leave civil society groups to raise doubts about the legitimacy of the election results and to provide the evidence that can help pave the way to genuinely free and fair elections the next time round.

While the excoriation of the Electoral Commission and BN will not get Pakatan far in reversing the election results, critical analysis of its own shortcomings that have prevented it from securing a greater measure of popular support will be more useful in helping the opposition establish a basis for an overwhelming victory five years from now.

The concern that Pakatan offers a potentially fragile replacement government and is badly divided on the key issue of Islam's role in the country's socio-political system remains in many minds - even among staunch Pakatan supporters - and needs to be addressed sooner, rather than later.

The three parties comprising Pakatan will also need to demonstrate that they have an inclusive political vision that can garner a larger measure of political support from Sabah and Sarawak's natives.

An important reason why BN has retained power has been the failure of the peninsula tsunami to be replicated in East Malaysia in 2008, and now again in 2013.

Malaysia's growing political maturity

What should both sides - BN and Pakatan - take away from the elections? Firstly, the limited success of the vote-buying and racial chauvinism-inciting campaign should lead both coalitions to rethink their post-election strategies and policies.

NONEThe present and next generation of voters will be even more predominantly urban dwellers, better educated and politically informed.

They will be less easily fooled by political rhetoric or bought over by handouts and promises of rewards - the latter is already viewed by many as akin to bribes that have an effect opposite to that intended.

Besides desiring fair and good governance, Malaysians crave for moderate and accommodative policies and will reject politicians and parties espousing racial and religious extremism.

The clock may have been turned back by the irresponsible post-election race-baiting engaged in by Utusan Malaysia and Mahathir. But it cannot be turned back on the country's growing political maturity and the changes for the better that this will bring.

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Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/229722>