

Umno's reactionary GE13 'victory'

MalaysiaKini.com

May 12, 2013

By Bridget Welsh

Umno's reactionary GE13 'victory'

COMMENT The May 2013 general election was a potential transition election in which the BN governing coalition held onto power.

The majority of the Malaysians supported an alternative government, but the incumbent Umno elite, supported by vested interests and years of constructing an electoral system in its favour, won out.

Even with yet another multi-ethnic national swing in electoral support towards Pakatan and more Malaysians voting than ever before, the incumbent elite in power held on, thwarting democracy.

NONE Earlier, I pointed to some of the specific questions surrounding the electoral roll, the placement of voters, the conduct of the election itself and the character of the results, highlighting many of the unanswered questions of GE13.

The process of evidence gathering has begun and in the months ahead many of the irregularities in the polls will be illustrated and investigated.

The contest between truth and denial has begun, with the BN banking on Malaysians forgetting, and for those filled with optimism for change this election, to let the disappointment turn into disengagement.

It is important to step out of the details of the election to identify some of the broader factors explaining the results. The process of understanding is now more pressing than ever.

A review of underlying factors in this election results shows real political strains that are only likely to deepen further. There is a growing battle in Malaysia between democratic pressures for change and resistance to these demands.

This election was a victory for the reactionary forces within Umno against change. Ironically, however, GE13 has the potential to serve as a catalyst for further democracy rather than the change in itself.

Electoral bias

This 44-seat BN majority – which ultimately came down to 22 seats favouring the BN of which more of than these have reported significant irregularities during the election – has to be seen for what it was, the success of a system in fighting for its survival.

Najib Abdul Razak and his party Umno pulled out all stops to hold onto power, myopically thinking little about the long term effects of using these means on Malaysia, or himself.

Most of the attention in the immediate aftermath of the GE has been on the system, drawing attention to the electoral bias deeply ingrained.

The elements of how skewed Malaysia's system has become openly apparent. The factors have long been identified by scholars – malapportionment (when one vote is not equal to another), gerrymandering (the drawing of lines in favor of the incumbent government), electoral roll manipulation (padding of the electoral roll with phantom voters and placement of these voters for strategic advantage), electoral administrative bias (reporting directly to the prime minister and failing to be a neutral arbitrator of the polling process), control of the mainstream media and more.

NONElectoral unfairness has long been established.

What marred these polls compared to earlier ones, was the open intimidation of civil servants and voters, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, during the election itself, moving Malaysia's election from free to 'partially free' – if there is such a thing as 'partially free'.

The systemic unevenness of the playing field has put the issues of electoral reform even more centre stage politically with attention on the upcoming delineation, the ongoing RCI in Sabah that addresses foreigners on the rolls and the election petitions that will be filed.

Bersih's people's tribunal will be an important avenue for evidence building. The reality is that without these biases, Malaysia would have a new government.

The dependence on the use of the state to hold onto power is illustrative of the increasing dependence of the elite on using levers of power to shore up its position, rather than its governance and performance.

With a lot of support from 'friends'

Also in these polls, the BN relied heavily on its 'friends' – to use the word termed by the Umno secretary-general. Those carried on planes were 'friends', those paying for free dinners for thousands and election entertainers were 'friends', those giving out money to voters were 'friends'.

NONEThis election brought to the surface the underlying economic relationships supporting the incumbent government and those benefitting from special licenses and access, those with personal relationships with those in power and those who have profited from the status quo.

The opposition made it clear that they were going to review the long-term business deals, and these special deals were to be protected at all costs.

While the primer for the polls is easy to estimate, as this was public money spent in budgets and announced publicly, an assessment of how much was spent in the campaign itself is much more difficult.

The vote buying in this election was rampant, with as much as RM3,000 allegedly paid for voters in Lembah Pantai (who were allegedly given yellow chits to cash in later) to RM20 in parts of rural Sarawak.

The average figure reported was RM500 per voter in most areas on the peninsula, with this prominent in rural and semi-rural areas.

The reports of vote buying are flooding in, but what is worrying this round is that unlike the use of this common practice in East Malaysia and during by-elections, this became a nation-wide phenomenon.

NONEThis was practiced even in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, and this was not all party funds, as the private sector played a more direct role.

The political economy of interests and their involvement in the elections is unprecedented in scope and the amount of funding. It is important to understand what many of these private interests represent – they resist opening up the economy to greater competition, they resist transparency in governance, and importantly they are comfortable with the status quo as it benefits their interests and the political elite they are close to.

Entrenched economic interests were party to the results, as they funded the process. This brings to the fore the serious issue also raised by scholars and Transparency International of a pressing need for campaign finance reform. Too

much of the campaign funding is behind closed doors.

Many would like to keep the doors closed and funds hidden, but these funds obscure business relationships that should be more open as they involve the people's welfare.

Lower class populism

This BN campaign was touted as 'people first' – and it was a carefully crafted lower class populist strategy. The focus of the efforts was on Malaysia's lower income group, those bringing home less than RM3,000 a household.

While race, generational differences, and the rural-urban divides were important in this election (and will be explored later), the dominant paradigm was class.

NONEThis campaign built on the weaknesses of the disadvantaged, playing on their financial needs through materialist incentives.

The government lost the overwhelming majority of the middle class and upper classes, the educated and informed, relying heavily on those less informed and engaged for its base. They won the majority of the lower classes, although not all.

The irony is that these lower class communities are in their financial positions by the very shortcomings of the incumbent governments policies, as income inequalities have widened and comparatively incomes of the majority of Malaysians have not significantly risen in decades, especially when one compares Malaysia with other regional neighbors.

Disproportionately, Malaysia's wealth is increasingly being held by those linked to the incumbent government, the political elite, who used the lower classes to stay in office, especially in East Malaysia.

Racial insecurity

The use of the lower classes is common in right-leaning regimes. One element that distinguishes the more reactionary elements of this system is the use of race, as the message explicitly and implicitly delivered to the Malay community in particular, especially economically vulnerable class Malays, was a racially embedded nationalist rhetoric based on the threat of the 'other'. The Chinese were painted as the other.

NONEThe mass rallies of Chinese supporters in places like Johor were used to stir

up fear and heighten insecurity of the Malay community who have long been told of displacement.

Many Malays dismissed this messaging, but others reacted, preferring the known to the unknown, equating Umno with security of their position politically and economically.

As with the economic interests mobilised in this campaign, this election was made out to be a crucial vote to protect the status quo from those who were touted to threaten their welfare, a negative vote against the forces of change supposedly led by a racial 'threat'.

The opposition was characterised as the enemy of the nation that Umno built that needed to be protected in often explicit terms. The larger the opposition rallies, the more the counter-reaction was harnessed as a campaign tool. The blaming of the Chinese in the wake of the polls was an extension of the race-based reactionary nationalism that has underscored the entire campaign.

Mahathir nostalgia

There was one more reactionary element in this GE13, the Mahathir factor. In many right-leaning governments, the use of the strongman leader is common.

While Najib was front and centre in the campaign posters, the man leading the campaign symbolically and strategically was Mahathir himself.

None Openly campaigning was just the surface. What marks this campaign are the trademarks of Mahathirism and 'old politics'.

Racial insecurity, manipulation of political institutions and mobilisation of groups and money were measures honed during his tenure.

Fundamentally, they were old tactics packaged in more modern expensive trimmings. Najib did not offer anything fundamentally new in terms of messaging or tactics, except the populist commercialisation financing.

Many of those who voted for Umno this election are nostalgic for the old era, an era of strongman politics, where decisions are decided by one man. Over and over again, the Umno voters in my interviews spoke of Mahathir as a hero.

There is a strong undercurrent of Malaysians, especially but not exclusively Malays, who want strong leadership and Mahathir's endorsement and blueprint in the

campaign made a difference.

Many of those that supported Umno did so because they were mobilised by Mahathir and Mahathirism.

Non-reformist minority-less government

Throughout the analysis, I have carefully not stated that this election was an endorsement of Najib Razak. The reason is simple – it is not clear that it was. The Najib factor might have been prominent in the BN messaging, but in the voting itself it has faded in importance.

Najib overpromised politically – failing to improve on the numbers of seats, failing to significantly deliver the non-Malay vote, failing to deliver Selangor and failing to come out of the campaign with a strong mandate in part due to the conduct of the polls and campaign itself. At best, this election is a weak mandate for Najib personally, who now faces an intense fight at party polls later this year. Umno is one of many parties facing internal polls by year's end, including PAS, MCA, Gerakan, and PKR.

NONEViews of Najib's ability to win the Umno polls differ, with some pointing to the new electoral process as advantaging him and others highlighting the low numbers and limited electoral gains – despite years of delay and massive amounts of funding – as obstacles.

It is too early to tell how the polls will play out, but signs are already brewing that he is up for a good fight.

He has the challenge of managing many warlords, including Mahathir himself, as his efforts to accommodate many interests in the party now will make the negotiation process taxing and expensive.

As shown by the number of Umno independents who ran, the management of the party has not been his strong suit.

The pattern in Malaysians politics has long been set that when Umno is confident it fights hard internally. Despite the electoral irregularities and bruising with the loss of the popular vote, within Umno this election is perceived as a victory for them.

They are on top, without having to listen to anyone and without having to accommodate any group. They have been given license to continue to rule.

There is no real comprehension that they represent a minority of Malaysians, or fundamental appreciation that they have no substantive minority representation within their ranks. Many could not care less.

The BN as a multi-ethnic coalition was smashed in 2008, but this election it is fundamentally destroyed. Non-Malay parties – now blamed by Umno elites for their own losses due to infighting – are irrelevant, to be used as punching bags for political frustration rather than as partners in governance.

Don't expect true reforms

This is the environment that Najib has inherited post GE13, one of even greater Umno hubris. Many in the party have no real appreciation that they are the reason for the mass defections away from the BN and the reason that most outreach efforts Najib made however genuine were fundamentally rejected.

Those that understand this are minority voices within Umno, being overshadowed by the race baiting post-election analysis that aims to distract from the discussion of electoral irregularities. Inclusion is no longer a priority now that the election is over.

Neither is reform. Najib has portrayed himself as a reformer, but the election itself, the results and the brewing battle in Umno squash any space for any reforms on both the economic and political front.

It is now difficult to liberalise sectors when the same interests that monopolise them paid for the campaign.

It is now difficult to engage in political reform, when the very institutions were weakened in their reputations by their perceived conduct in the polls.

Najib now faces not only a trust deficit, but a more angry and disappointed majority who see him negatively. He cannot appeal to the electorate for support in any reform effort due to this lack of trust.

He simultaneously faces an internal fight, led by the main beneficiaries of the GE13 results, who see him as failing to deliver and being dependent on Mahathir, who many feel really brought home the victory.

The people are also no longer important, as attention focuses on the political elite. This is another real disconnect in the post-election environment.

After mobilising the electorate unprecedentedly, the focus is not on listening to what the people voted for, but to use the results however constructed and interpreted for elite interests and battles.

Trying to relive the past

It is this sort of disregard that inspires anger, and forges greater disconnect between the Umno government and Malaysians. The perception of entitlement to govern runs deep, as the conception in Mahathir mode is that people follow, rather than lead. The ultimately reactionary element of this election is that the people are unimportant.

The constraints on reform in Malaysia have always been significant, but this election reveals that when threatened there will be mobilized efforts to protect the status quo. The mobilisation efforts however had an unintended consequence.

NONERather than buoy Najib to victory with his own mandate, they have galvanised reactionary forces interested in reliving the past, moving Malaysia back to the era of Mahathirism.

Najib faces a difficult path to navigate, as he is still focusing on shoring up his political position rather than governance. He cannot substantively rely on the election results for leverage.

The GE13 election has opened the eyes of many in the public of the realities of the system, and potentially will be a catalyst to widen the differences between those advocating reform and those preventing it. The reactionaries against reform are in the driving seat.

The disconnect between the old politics and new realities will only widen further as Malaysia moves bravely forward into a new political world.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/229894>