

Silver linings in a GE13 without gold

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COMMENT The dust is beginning to settle one week after the dirtiest election in the country's history. Some of the dirt will stick, while others will hopefully wash away as the memory of the election fades.

My earlier pieces have focussed on the questions about the electoral process and impact of an Umno 'victory'. Here I turn to the effects of the election on the expansion of democracy in Malaysia.

The message is one of strength, not weakness, or hope, rather than despair.

A strengthened opposition

As the results came in on polling day, despite the irregularities, a new political landscape has been created. Foremost, is that Pakatan is a viable electoral entity. Unlike in 2008 or even in Sarawak 2011, this campaign was a Pakatan opposition campaign. The opposition went into the polls together, rather than meeting for the first time after the results or at the seat negotiation table.

penang black rally post-ge13 record crowd 70 On the ground and in the ceramah there was more open cooperation among the three parties. While much more can be done to forge stronger relationships and while ideological differences persist, the common bonds were stronger as Malaysia was given the option to choose a viable national alternative.

The two-coalition option has changed the landscape politically, assuring that alternative views will play a role in setting agendas, shaping policies and representing perspectives in governance ahead.

This opposition is now national in scope - it has a foothold in every state and, importantly, more than one party in Pakatan has representation in every state. This national footprint is unprecedented as Pakatan now has a base to build on.

The majority of seats are at the state level, where the opposition has won 229 seats* (95 for DAP, 85 for PAS and 49 for PKR) or 45 percent of the entire state seats up for grabs. The opposition may only hold on to three state governments - Penang, Kelantan and Selangor, but it has powerful minorities in Terengganu, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Kedah and has sizeable minorities in every state.

The state assembly is an excellent arena to develop experience, groom talent and connect with people. The opposition simultaneously holds on to 40 percent of the seats in parliament, with many experienced MPs.

Diversity Pakatan's strength

This opposition is more multiethnic and representative, as Pakatan has taken over the inclusiveness banner from the BN. There are more non-Malays represented in Pakatan than the BN, while the majority of representatives in the opposition are Malay, representing the majority population.

NONE Unlike the BN, many of the members in Pakatan are not from the political elite, as they come from more diverse backgrounds while at the same time have stronger professional training than in earlier years. More attention has been spent on selecting better calibre leaders.

The opposition coalition has already apparently been tested, as offers were made at both national and state levels to defect. From calls to the DAP to PAS, and individual offers of funds and positions of power to reps to move across, the immediate impact has been one of Pakatan resilience.

While some of the responses by disgruntled factions such as those in Selangor were unstatesmanlike and not in keeping with what is expected of national leaders, the immediate dynamic has been one of stronger ties. The shadow and shared pain caused by electoral irregularities over the polls, which has affected all the parties, has reinforced these bonds.

In the months ahead, as the opposition parties also head to internal polls this year, strain will inevitably be placed on the opposition coalition with the reality of defections always being present. Time will tell who is really loyal to reform and who are those who are more vested personally in the trappings of power. Strain will come in the form of different ideas and priorities, but time will also tell whether five years of dialogue will overpower the points of dissent.

Learning lessons

The tests for the opposition will be fierce in the months ahead. Most of these will be internally generated. As with Umno's polls, all the opposition parties face significant challenges internally, accommodating the new representatives, addressing regeneration and resolving factionalism and ideological differences within parties.

NONEThey have to deal with the fact that unlike in 2008 the opposition is not an equal partnership in terms of results. The DAP won the lion's share of the seats, with PAS suffering the most losses. All three parties gained in popular vote, however, despite the unevenness of the results, and their representation has broadened nationally across parties.

It is no longer fully correct to speak about the parties as representing only one community, as all fielded Malaysians across ethnicities, although the roots of the party identities are still strong and can feed into the differences among and within parties.

Beyond dealing with unevenness of the results the parties also have to address the reality that in some fundamental ways their electoral strategies did not work. The results cannot be completely blamed on the irregularities. The outreach to the Malay lower classes and East Malaysia were not effective, clearly.

The postmortems that will be done will be essential in setting the course for the future, but also affect opposition cooperation. These debates are likely to be played out during party elections. One important dimension will be how much blame will centre on one another.

In this regard there are two important points to share. First, governance issues played a major role in the results. In both Penang and Selangor these state governments gained at the polls, reflecting confidence in performance. The comparatively poorer performance of PAS governed states, especially in Kedah, contributed to the loss of seats.

Kelantan faces the struggle of regeneration and new ideas, and Kedah's PAS leadership did not inspire confidence, especially among the young in Kedah. It is not a coincidence that PAS lost this government, as it was clearly in the cards well before the results were announced. This is a real challenge for Pakatan ahead, the need to put qualified professionals in leadership positions to govern.

NONEThe challenge is especially pressing for PAS. The time for ustaz-dominant state administrative leadership has passed, and this dynamic is difficult for the old guard in PAS to accept, and this refusal at acceptance lost public support. PAS has to come to terms with the situation that if it wants to govern nationally, it has to field national leaders that are seen as qualified capable national leaders.

The second lesson was one of infighting within the opposition. Factionalism has now become common in all the parties, and this contributed to losses for Pakatan - in Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Perak notably.

Umno comparatively was not as affected by division as Pakatan in the final results, perhaps with Selangor the exception. With political expansion comes the challenge of party management, minimisation of rogue factions/inflated egos and improving communications.

Greater reflection on the results, the campaign performance, the manifestos and messaging are part and parcel of any postmortem on an election, but what needs to be appreciated is that lessons have to come from all sides, including the actions of the opposition itself. This is an inherent part of expanding democratic governance.

People's power

Ultimately, this election was one shaped by the people. Ordinary Malaysians came out in record numbers, guarded the barricades against electoral fraud, watched and reported on the process and stood up to be counted. Their participation was truly extraordinary.

Most voted for change, but many voted for the status quo. In all assessments of the polls, the voices of dissent cannot be dismissed and ignored. They are part of the mosaic that makes up Malaysia, the neighbours, colleagues and friends who are part of the community.

penang black rally post-ge13 record crowd 4Empowerment and activism were centre-stage in this election. The intensity of emotions and scope of involvement was unprecedented, across the political divide. Rather than work through parties and elites, people decided on their own what to do and just did it. Malaysians embraced their roles as citizens this election, voting and participating like never before across the globe.

As such, larger geographic sections of Malaysia have become more politically awakened compared to the past. A new 505 political cohort has been shaped. This election saw a southern awakening, as Johoreans joined political events in unprecedented numbers, including Malays, and it saw an increased awareness of the young in politics.

The gains at the polls for the opposition would not have been possible without multiethnic and youth support. The awakenings have happened in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Penang in 2008, and in the urban areas of Sarawak in 2011. They have happened in the universities and on Facebook.

The gains translated into more seats and popular votes for the opposition and have now done so on repeated occasions, as voters once aware became more committed politically. Political awakenings in Malaysia have been resilient to date. Key will be whether this trend continues, as voters recognise their power as agents of change to affect the outcome at the polls and shape the political discourse.

This was also combined with an increased sense of national identity. Malaysians put Malaysia first in record numbers, and openly condemned racism, intolerance and unfairness. In the wake of the elections, the extraordinary character of Malaysians came through, not just in the messaging, but the acceptance of others and the views of others, even at the height of disappointment.

The black 505 rallies were celebrations of community, not dates for division. While anger persists among many, with many gutted by how the election was conducted, increasingly the focus of the anger is constructively aimed on reform rather than on blaming fellow Malaysians.

This constructiveness was even echoed by some Umno members (although only a handful), despite the vitriol spewed by the mainstream media outlets and by the race blame game of some leaders, and this speaks to the maturity and national character of the majority. The days of racial suspicion are on the decline, as the post-GE13 bonds of the Malaysians family are being forged and strengthened. This is a mark of a new Malaysia on the eve of May 13th.

GE13 a new beginning

Politics in democracies are not just about elections. The contestation over power and engagement over issues does not end at the ballot box. In fact, it just begins.

NoneOne of the most transformative changes nationally has been politics moving outside of the arena of formal politics. More and more Malaysians are involved in political activities outside of political parties, away from elite politics. This election is likely to only deepen this trend, to move people towards where they can see immediate results from engagement.

The impact will be a broadening of political contestation nationally, a strengthening of civil society and even more political empowerment in local communities. The doors of electoral power may appear closed for now, but there are other doors opening. Other electoral doors will open as well in the future.

These activities will only serve to bring more empowered and informed people to the polls in the next electoral contest and for the battles ahead over reform,

especially electoral reform. This will only strengthen democratic governance in Malaysia, as more power will be embraced by the people, especially younger Malaysians.

GE13 offers real promise of change, despite the obstacles in the process itself and the reactionary responses. The steps ahead are outreach and understanding, community building and mutual appreciation. The burden rests on all of Malaysia's leaders to act with statesmanship, to not forget that GE13 was a people's election and the voice of all the people needs to be respected and engaged.

The election itself may have thwarted a democratic result, but the mobilisation around the polls and lessons in the aftermath show that the pressures and avenues for inclusive democratic governance remain robust.

*Editor's note: Inclusive of Sarawak, there are 576 state seats in Malaysia. This means that in total, Pakatan holds 244 state seats (107 for DAP, 95 for PAS and 52 for PKR) or 42.4 percent of total state seats in the country.

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