

What happened in GE13, and what now?

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ANALYSIS In a brief commentary elsewhere ('Malaysia's election result - no surprise to the knowledgeable,' Asian Currents, June 2013), I have noted one paradoxical but hugely important consequence of Malaysia's recent national elections held on 5 May.

A paradox: anomalous domination

The remarkable, perhaps "counter-intuitive", fact is that, while the election result itself - namely, a fairly close but nonetheless comfortable victory of the Umno-centred Barisan Nasional side over the Pakatan Rakyat opposition - came as no great surprise, that unremarkable result nonetheless had one quite surprising, even paradoxical, consequence.

From GE13 an electorally weakened Umno emerged politically even more dominant than it had been before. While still embattled in the broader political arena, Umno was delivered a dominant position within the parliament, ruling coalition and government.

By bestowing it with that now dominant parliamentary position, GE13 had delivered into Umno's hands an ascendancy over the governing BN coalition, government policy, parliament's agenda and parliamentary process, and thereby over national political life - over the nation's affairs and direction - of a quite unprecedented and perhaps irresistible kind.

NONEWhat are the relevant facts here?

The immediate challenge facing Premier Najib Abdul Razak (right), it had been said in the run-up to GE13, was at best to win back the two-thirds majority (or 148 of the 222 seats in the Dewan Rakyat), or at least to improve on the 2008 yield of 140.

More modest and realistic than demanding recovery of the two-thirds majority, some suggested that even 145 would have been a "good result", good enough to ensure his immediate political survival against critics, adversaries and doubters in his own camp.

In the event, worse even than at GE12 in 2008, Umno/BN won only 133 seats. For

those who might be satisfied with nothing less than assured domination - a constitutionally unassailable and impregnable position - a shortfall of 8 seats had now almost doubled to 15.

Yet - as I noted in my summary review - behind all its archaising ceremonialism and cultural nostalgia, politics and political thinking within Umno is nothing other than Realpolitik of the most ruthlessly pragmatic kind. And realistically, Umno (if its interests, and nothing else, are to be the focus of analysis, as the party "hard men" insist) did not do at all badly.

Why?

Because, paradoxically, its political domination was enhanced, not diminished, by the election result - despite the further decline in the government's parliamentary numbers and the opposition's advances.

Drawing a contrast between the post-election situation of Umno/BN and its Pakatan Rakyat adversary is instructive here.

The Pakatan Rakyat coalition won a total of 89 seats. The opposition coalition's parliamentary numbers are reasonably balanced. All three of its constituent parties have a sizeable and, if not an equal then a comparable, presence in the Dewan Rakyat (DAP holds 38 seats, PKR 30, PAS 21). The smallest of the three, PAS, contributes about a quarter of the opposition's parliamentary numbers, while the largest, DAP, more than two-fifths but less than a half.

Contrast that with the situation on the government side.

Of BN's 133 seats, Umno now holds 88 (up from 79 in 2008). Its MPs amount to two-thirds of the total BN parliamentary representation.

Umno alone has a parliamentary presence that is virtually the same as that of the combined opposition.

Its shortfall of a single seat, if that troubles anybody who matters, is one that might be readily reversed through a by-election victory, the timely defection of an "unhappy" opposition MP, or even a successful appeal against the result in, say, Bachok or some other constituency where the Umno candidate had fallen narrowly short of victory in the election night count.

Now compare Umno's situation among its governing BN partners with the more balanced situation in the opposition coalition's parliamentary numbers.

After Umno, the next largest party on that side of the house holds only 14 seats. The Umno's customary "primary partners" going back to Alliance Party times even preceding independence, the Chinese MCA and the Indian MIC, now together hold only 11 (7 and 4 respectively) and its newer ally Gerakan, 1 - the decline in their public plausibility and electoral viability coming as the result of, and signifying, the increasing Umno dominance over its old BN partners in deciding national policy over the last decade.

After GE13, more even than before, the Umno's ability to head a government, and rule over the nation's core in peninsular Malaysia, now rests disproportionately upon the seats that its fractious East Malaysian partners hold in Sarawak and Sabah (34 seats, together held by 8 different parties, many of them loose, unstable personal alliances of mercurial, opportunistic and "gymnastic" leaders.)

Umno's task will be to satisfy, appease and manage its increasingly assertive, and at times even restive, East Malaysian partners who now so heavily underwrite BN's, and hence Umno's, ability to rule.

But provided it can do that, in numerical and political terms Umno now dominates - perhaps as never before - the national government.

Provided it can decide without internal strife what it wants to do, provided it "knows its own mind", it will be in a powerful position in the years ahead to have its way on all significant political and policy issues, so long as its Sabah and Sarawak allies can be kept "in line".

In national government, an era of unprecedented Umno domination may now be in the offing.

Umno's oddly empowering victory

Some indication of the nature and sources of the Umno's success - of how it stands to grow greatly in effective power from its diminished parliamentary base - is suggested by the relative size of the three components within the opposition's parliamentary delegation.

The Pakatan delegation is reasonably balanced, but not entirely so. It displays one anomalous feature. What is in many ways the most substantial member of the opposition coalition, the Islamic Party PAS, has the smallest parliamentary representation.

azlanThis is because, in Malaysia's imbalanced and "malapportioned" electoral system, PAS unlike its coalition partners competes directly against Umno for "bulk" Malay votes: that is, for support from the core, more traditionally-minded and less cosmopolitan Malay voters in the rural Malay heartlands. They are direct rivals for the support of the core part of the nation's Malay political core component, the core of the core.

Those rural Malay areas are hugely favoured in the drawing of electoral boundaries - which is to say in their size, meaning the smaller number of votes that is necessary for them to elect an MP. It is in those parts of the country, in those electorates, that Malay domination of national political life is grounded.

And, of the opposition parties, only PAS competes directly against Umno for those votes.

Their struggle is a "zero-sum game". It is an "up and down" thing, a constant long-term oscillation. When Umno does badly, PAS numbers increase and PAS political influence grows (and vice versa).

That has always been the basis of PAS's political strength and long-term strategy. By its ability to win popular Malay support, and so to deprive Umno of the credibility and legitimacy that substantial Malay support ensures, PAS can at times exercise enormous influence over Umno, over its policies and direction, from outside.

But when Umno does well, PAS numbers and its immediate influence upon Umno thinking are diminished. When Umno does well electorally, it denies PAS this important leverage. PAS's ability to force itself upon its rival's thinking in the setting of national priorities and direction - even to set terms that Umno cannot resist - declines.

When it succeeds in this way in freeing itself to some degree from the constraints imposed by PAS - from the strategic stranglehold that in its "good years" results from PAS's political success and ensuing Malay "moral credibility" - Umno wins for itself some significantly increased political "room for manoeuvre".

That is what happened at the recent GE13. The question to ask is why? How was it done?

The winning campaign

The key to the election result, and to Umno's improbable feat of drawing increased political strength from reduced parliamentary numbers and a weakened

parliamentary position, was Umno's success in its head-on clash with PAS for Malay votes in the Malay heartlands - for the "core Malay vote".

Perkasa president Ibrahim Ali Much has been made of the fact that the two members of the Malay ethno-supremacist pressure group Perkasa whom Umno directly or indirectly endorsed - Zulkifli Noordin in the Klang Valley "beltway" seat of Sham Alam and Ibrahim Ali (right) in PAS "crown jewels" seat of Pasir Mas - lost to their adversaries. There was no comfort for Umno in those two results.

This has prompted some commentators to suggest that the GE13 results signal a clear repudiation by the national electorate as a whole, Malay as well as non-Malay, of Perkasa, its approach and what it stands for.

But the matter is not so simple or clear.

The nature of the winning campaign has to be more closely considered.

(i) The international level

The government's GE13 campaign operated at several levels. For international consumption, notably the foreign investment and diplomatic communities, one story was developed.

This was the beguiling story of Prime Minister Najib as the heroic but still shackled economic reformer, the eager and available driver of administrative transformation - and also of taxation reform, in the form of reduced corporate and personal taxation, all to be made good by the reasonably prompt post-election introduction of a goods and services tax (GST).

Glued onto this portrait was another. This was the picture of Najib as the self-proclaimed and internationally acclaimed, "global moderate", the champion of interfaith conciliation and the determined enemy of all forms of political extremism, but especially that driven by religious militants and fanatics.

This "international campaign" projecting Najib as a soon to be unbound economic Prometheus and also a fastidious moderate who would "have no truck" with any crude, populist extremism was offered with a clear objective.

Its purpose was to win for the prime minister and his party a sympathetic hearing overseas and, with it, the indulgence of a free hand at home to wage the other parts of their multilevel campaign.

Overseas, that portrait of Najib was reassuring, and people there would be satisfied with it. Nothing more to be asked for. Its plausibility had simply to be upheld. For example, against the free-lance meddling of a rogue Australian senator.

(ii) The domestic pantomime

While this "image campaign" was offered internationally, the Najib who was seen for months on the campaign trail at home was something different. At home the prime minister cut a benign and ever-avuncular figure as he campaigned up and down the country by recourse to a kind of "Santa Claus politics" (as some called it). Its simplicity was that of a holiday pantomime. Or perhaps a traveling circus: "every few minutes something new, something different, something dramatic! Something for everybody!"

There was something, something new, for somebody every day, a new inducement or "softener" for yet another interest group or finely drawn demographic category.

This was a campaign to the nation's socially disaggregated parts, to its separate disarticulated elements, not to the nation as a whole.

It was not a campaign that projected any distinctive concept that the prime minister may have had, and wished to promote, of the Malaysian nation and its evolving destiny.

It was instead a campaign directed to every individual voter and every special interest-group or social element. It was one that encouraged them all to ask "What is in this for me? For us?" - and which then provided an answer. Concretely and immediately, tangibly. An answer not in words or ideas but in palpable material benefits and - "just for you and people like you, in your same situation or predicament" - specified provisions.

Prime Minister Najib offered a vast menu of hand-outs and rewards - at prospectively huge cost to public expenditure, to the national accounts and the government's coffers - in the hope of attaching ever more securely to himself his own side's loyal political followers, and of attracting the undecided to join them in supporting him and his cause.

This was hardly the kind of campaign that international investors, eager to see clear evidence of some sort of advance pre-election commitment to fiscal austerity and economic responsibility, can have been hoping to see Umno run. Not what they had in mind!

But, though it involved huge public expenditures and costly promises, those promises had been accompanied by assurances of reduced corporate tax levels. So, overall, it may have pleased those foreign bystanders anyway: as a strategy that would make prompt Malaysian adoption of a GST to pay for it all inevitable.

It may have appealed to them as a neat way to make the fickle, imprudent and gullible people pay for all the offered benefits and promises that they had so unwisely and unaffordably chosen to accept. (Significantly, mention of the impending introduction of a GST was no part of the election campaign, neither Umno/BN's nor the opposition's.)

So allied to Najib "the great transformer in waiting" and Najib the global moderate was Najib "the great dispenser of treats and inducements" - who was also, or so it was hoped by some, "the canny, crafty promoter of a GST", the masterful maker of traps and ambushes who was making the GST's introduction necessary and laying the grounds for its general acceptance.

"Of course we may all have these benefits. We Malaysians are entitled to nothing less. But we Malaysians too - who else? - must pay for them. In doing so we will not only reward ourselves and ensure our government's fiscal viability from which every citizen benefits.

We can make Malaysia, more even than before, the up-to-date model of a developing nation and the envy of the entire postcolonial world". It is not hard to script the arguments that will need to be made and invoked.

(iii) The real campaign

Umno/BN's was a multi-level campaign.

The first level projected Najib's image internationally as an economic reformer and religious moderate. Here he was portrayed as an intelligent and polished progressive in a land where progressives were not conspicuously plentiful in official circles.

The second was a campaign that kept Najib - not so much Najib himself as his "simulacrum", his carefully constructed image - prominent in the public eye. But only through very controlled and tightly managed situations.

It projected him as a man less with a mission than with a wonderful "magic pudding" that might continually, without ever becoming exhausted, be parcelled out and distributed to the people for their enjoyable and cost-free consumption.

This second campaign, in many ways a media construct or artefact, was largely a diversion and a distraction. It was devised to create a plausible appearance of dynamism and momentum to what had become, among the world's notable political parties, an ungainly, lumbering and sclerotic dinosaur. It was staged to divert unwelcome attention from the real campaign.

It was, of course, those two "show campaigns" that occupied and entirely seized the attention of the international media. Meanwhile, the real campaign was conducted with unremitting determination, even ruthlessness, beneath the "foreign radar", out of view of most overseas reporters and commentators.

What was the "real" campaign?

The nature of Umno/BN election strategy was clear. Like all intelligent political analysts, those in the party's "brains trust" and campaign "engine room" could see that the vast bulk of Chinese voters were lost to BN and were unlikely to be won back, no matter what the old ruling party bloc did or promised.

Much of the Indian vote too was lost, but not all of it was entirely beyond recall. Part of it might be won back with some dramatic gestures (most remarkable of which was the Hindraf rapprochement).

But while winning back that partial Indian support might do Umno/BN's political image some much needed good by providing some symbolic rehabilitation for its claims of intercultural accommodation, those Indian votes that might be won over would never be enough to secure an Umno/BN victory.

So the strategy of the real campaign was focused elsewhere.

It was a battle for Malay votes.

Umno/BN saw, as some who were not part of its campaign also understood, that the key to the election was the Malay votes. In comparison, nothing else really mattered much at all.

The key question was whether Umno/BN, and especially Umno itself, could win enough peninsular Malay votes, and enough of them in the right places - meaning in the right local constituencies - for Umno, in association with its Sarawak and Sabah allies, to secure a clear parliamentary majority.

So the campaign was focused and conducted where it mattered.

It was conducted in Malay terms and directed to a Malay audience. Meaning, the campaign was projected above all in the daily Malay-language press, notably the Umno's own *Utusan Malaysia*, and via the Malay-language programming of the television channels with the greatest Malay reach, principally TV3 and RTM.

It was a campaign conducted for the votes of Malays, mainly for those of the great bulk of the more "traditionally-minded" Malays, in the Malay rural heartland areas.

The Umno campaign was simple: "all is at risk!" There is no protection, it kept hammering away, for you and your family, for all Malays, for the Malay stake in the country, for Islam or for the Malay rulers who are the ultimate bastion of our Malay-Islamic identity and national primacy - other than us here in Umno.

It was a campaign that appealed to their sense of themselves - to their sense of Malay identity and of Malay centrality to national life. It was a campaign that sought to suggest how tenuous the basis of Malay identity had now become in national life, how insecure the Malay grip upon the Malay stake in the nation had become. Everything that was distinctively Malay about Malaysia, it was suggested, was now under threat.

It was a campaign that both cultivated and then also appealed to a Malay sense of political and cultural peril, even crisis. It was a campaign that consisted of a managed panic: that the Malays were now beleaguered in their own land, the Tanah Melayu. Their historic stake in the nation was being whittled away and was now in jeopardy.

It was a campaign that sought to suggest that, as political currents were now running, it was not fanciful but realistic to imagine that Malays might one day soon "hilang di dunia" (in the words of the classical formulation), that they might disappear from the face of the earth.

It was a campaign of controlled communal panic. Malays and their way of life are beleaguered, and, central to their way of life, Islam was in jeopardy. Malay historical primacy and political leadership, the religious ascendancy of Islam, and the constitutional position of the Malay state rulers as their "untrumpable" guarantors had become the sacred trinity of the Umno campaign.

Everything that mattered to the Malay majority and its conventional loyalties was now at risk, it was suggested. It was threatened by the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition - of which of course, the Islamic Party PAS was a key component. In the division of political labour between the Pakatan partners, it fell to PAS to wage the

direct contest against Umno for votes in the nation's Malay heartlands core.

So, above all else, the national election - an election that would decide the prime minister's and his party's future - turned upon a contest for "the national Malay soul" between Umno and PAS.

That was the real campaign.

It was the campaign that won the election for Umno/BN.

And it was a campaign that the many overseas reporters and commentators who flocked to Kuala Lumpur for a week or two simply did not see or "read" or understand.

It went beneath their radar, it was beyond their social, professional and imaginative reach. It was outside their range of cultural accessibility - and also that, to be fair to them, of the vast majority of "like-minded" and "sympathetic" young urban Malaysians whom they were delighted to meet: who captured their attention, won their sympathy, and shaped their view of Malaysian society and politics.

For many of those intelligent, persuasive and globally-networked young Kuala Lumpur cosmopolitans, the Malay heartlands and those who live there are just as foreign and remote a world as they certainly were to the visiting journalists.

The young sophisticates with their congenial "discourse" and "narratives" were nice people, but a very poor guide to what the election was really about - how it was being conducted where it really mattered.

But, to those who were running the "real" campaign that inattention was no problem. On the contrary. Let the foreign press write the stories that might please them, that seemed to centre upon the overseas journalists' own effete concerns, not those of the rural Malay voters. Let them chase after stories that led them away from the real story, the main action.

After all, the "real campaign" for Malay votes in the heartlands - for a firm place within and a hold upon the Malay soul - would prosper best if it went unrecognised and unreported by the meddling and opinionated visitors of the international press.

Let them meddle instead where their own interests and sympathies were engaged, not where their intruding curiosity might prove inconvenient, even embarrassing.

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