

Race politics gave BN the edge, say academics

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By Lawrence Yong

BN will be able to rule Malaysia for a long time through a deeply intense communal strategy which has re-emerged after the GE13.

This also marks a move away from democracy in Malaysia compared to the 2008 elections, academics said, after dissecting the recent election results.

NONE"Whenever Umno can make Malays feel threatened, they benefit," said William Case (right), an American political scientist from City University of Hong Kong.

"Malaysian society is growing more differentiated and more complex but ethnicity is still king. The crown is slipping but it has not fallen off yet."

Calling the GE13 a setback for democracy, they said the opposition did everything right but will still fail to topple BN in future polls unless the upcoming delineation exercise diffuses racial voting lines in Malaysia.

Case, who has observed Malaysian politics for over 35 years was one of 12 academicians who presented talks on the GE13 in a one day forum on democracy at the Universiti Malaya.

He labeled the GE13 a "strange" one.

"The opposition coalition Pakatan did win more seats and the popular vote but only DAP did well. BN lost but Umno had one of its best elections ever gaining more votes from the Malays and has just one short of Pakatan's 88 seats," Case said.

Case recalled that Umno was in a disarray after the "stunning" loss of their two-thirds majority in Parliament in 2008, which then looked like it would usher in a two-party system in Malaysia.

NONEPrime Minister Najib Abdul Razak (right) who took over the reins from Abdullah Badawi in 2009 had promised to unleash liberal reforms, abolish the ISA laws and more press freedom under his 1Malaysia campaign.

Five years on, in post GE13 period, the picture is very different.

Even though BN failed to wrest back its two-thirds majority in Parliament and its major component parties MCA and MIC suffered setbacks, Umno was "galvanised."

"Umno is now arrogant and defiant, quite a change between 2008 and 2013...it looks like Malaysia has gone backwards," Case said.

He said that Umno's success in GE13 was due to its return to its root strategy - to garner support primarily from lower income Malays in the smaller rural districts.

"All in Umno except Najib recognised that Chinese voters were lost, so Umno decided to go it alone and targeted PAS and DAP," he said. "The more DAP aroused the Chinese crowd, the more in need of Umno's protection that the 'little' Malays felt."

Hardline trend

Umno has shown a more hardline trend after GE13. Najib himself was wounded by the lack of Chinese support and labeled it "a Chinese tsunami," just after the election results were announced.

Case cited the use of new coercive laws such as Peaceful Assembly Act, Sedition Act and new controls on social media as examples of what appears to be a reverse of Najib's previous democratic reforms.

"Malaysia will settle back to its state as an 'electoral authoritarian' regime. Next year, it will be the 40th anniversary of the regime (first created in 1974, just after May 13, 1969 racial riots) and in the world, only Singapore has done it longer," Case added.

He concluded his 45 minute presentation on a pessimistic note that younger democracies such as Myanmar and Indonesia were now far ahead of Malaysia in 'procedural' democracy terms, where the people get to choose the government they want in free and fair elections.

NONEGE13 saw the highest voter turnout ratio since 1964 with almost 10.5 million votes cast. Pakatan, in its most united showing ever, raked in 53% of the popular votes, compared to BN's 47% but this did not translate into parliamentary seats.

BN has 133 seats against Pakatan's 88 seats in Parliament.

"Why did BN win the elections?" Universiti Malaya Centre for Democracy and Elections (Umcedel)'s director Prof Mohd Redzuan Othman (left) asked rhetorically.

Drawing on election results data, Redzuan said 'gerrymandering' played a key role.

He said that with a few exceptions to the rule, Pakatan won in the bigger constituencies while BN won in smaller constituencies. He said BN also won when a constituency had a majority of Malay voters.

NONE "It is very clear that for BN to win they need to have at least 66% Malay votes unless they have a substantial number of Indian votes," Redzuan said.

Redzuan also said that their survey of historical data unveiled that Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak had the smallest mandate and poorest election showing compared to past five Malaysian leaders facing their first national elections.

Previous prime ministers had as much as 60-90% of the popular vote.

As a sidenote, he said that Umdecel survey showed that posters and banners did not influence voters citing Lembah Pantai as an example where BN flags were more visible but they still lost.

'Minority vote crucial'

Commenting on Indian votes in the last election, Umcedel fellow and political scientist Balakrishnan Suppaiah said that GE13 showed that the minority vote was becoming more crucial.

NONE He said that statements of Indian support returning to BN was "debatable." His own surveys showed that more Indians - particularly young men - now backed the opposition.

"Minority empowerment is getting better and better as the regime wants to keep Indians on the side of the establishment to serve the overall interest of the Malays," Suppaiah (left) said.

Umcedel also presented a case study of Temerloh, Pahang where Saifuddin Abdullah, who is seen as a liberal young Umno leader, failed to defend his Temerloh parliamentary constituency against PAS Youth chief Nasrudin Hassan, who is known for his hardline Islamic stance.

Through a survey of 850 respondents made over three days recently, Umcedel concluded that the Chinese swing votes were the reason Saifuddin lost as Chinese families were pressured by their returning children to try and change the

government.

NONE" They supported the opposition not because of the principle, not because of the struggle but because of the "Ubah" tune.... a big number of them do not even know who was the PAS candidate," Umcedel's Redzuan said.

"Many of the Chinese work and stay away from their parents but they came back for this particular election."

Adding that the Chinese now realised they were duped, he jokingly predicted that if a re-election was held today, Saifuddin would win back his seat in Parliament.

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