

**Plans afoot to rig polls: opposition**  
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Malaysia's Election Commission (EC) has dramatically scrapped a plan to use indelible ink to prevent multiple voting and stop phantom voters, provoking a storm of protests among opposition parties, which were expecting to make major gains at the polls tomorrow.  
MCPX

The sudden reversal of the plan to use indelible ink has put the spotlight on the Malaysia's electoral process. It comes as political analysts expect a growing number of urban voters to switch to the opposition this time.

The U-turn was announced Tuesday, just four days before polling day. The plan to use ink to block phantom voters and multiple voting was mooted in June. In February this year, the EC reportedly ordered 47,000 bottles of indelible black ink from India at a cost of over RM2 million.

EC chairman Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman said police investigations had revealed that certain quarters had smuggled in some ink and had planned to dupe rural voters into believing that they had to have their fingernails marked before they could vote - rather than after.

"They are out to create confusion and suspicion by persuading those not familiar with the procedure to have the ink applied (to a voter's forefinger or nail) before polling day," he was quoted as saying. He added that the EC viewed this seriously as the election process and public order and security could not be compromised.

Another reason given was that a legal framework had to be put in place to enforce the use of indelible ink especially in cases where voters declined to have their fingers marked or insisted on their constitutional right to vote.

Opposition parties, however, cried foul and said it was further evidence that dirty tricks would be used or the elections rigged, a charge the EC denies.

"This reversal is either an indication of the intent to commit fraud, else it is a sign of the incompetence that is now in government," one political analyst said. "Either way, we are (done for) - and that's why we need to give these guys a real shake, and wake-up call." He added that existing laws were already there when the decision to use indelible ink was taken; " ...so why was (the decision) taken if it wasn't going to be implemented?"

Civil society groups and opposition parties had earlier expressed concern over gerrymandering of electoral boundaries, duplicate registrations of voters, and batches of voters on the electoral rolls sharing identical addresses. News reports also revealed that up to 9,000 voters above 100 years old were found in the electoral rolls, adding suspicion that the rolls contained many dead voters.

A major source of concern is the transparency - or lack of it - surrounding postal ballots, which are mainly used by military and police personnel.

## **Independent news sources**

In the last general election in 2004, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition won 64 percent of the popular vote as it captured a record 91 percent of the parliamentary seats. Much of the success was attributed to the high expectations of reforms placed on the new administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who succeeded Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 2003, after the latter had ruled the country for 22 years.

Those high expectations have largely been unmet as Abdullah's reform agenda to wipe out corruption and abuse of power has floundered.

This time opposition parties hope to deny the ruling coalition a two-thirds majority in Parliament, a psychological threshold which would enable them to block amendments to the federal constitution. It's a tall order - the only time that has happened before was in 1969 - given the odds stacked against the opposition parties PKR, DAP and Islamic party PAS.

For one thing, the mainstream media coverage has been heavily in favour of the BN coalition. The little coverage the opposition parties receive is usually either negative or confined to the trivial, superficial aspects of their campaign.

A group of civil society volunteers monitoring the media's coverage found that "mainstream newspapers gave up to 77 percent coverage for the ruling BN in the week leading to nominations on Feb. 24". "On average, the six newspapers for which data were collated had between 50 and 70 percent stories that portrayed the BN in a positive light," they found.

"During the campaign, the mainstream media begins to lobby unashamedly for the BN," this time based on its tag-line of 'Security, Peace, Prosperity', observed media academic Zaharom Nain. Success stories of the BN are highlighted while there is marginalising, demonising and belittling of the opposition, he pointed out.

But that has not stopped many urban voters, with access to independent news sources on the Internet, from turning towards the opposition in urban centres such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

One of the major issues is the spiralling cost of essentials and the prospect of another round of price hikes on the back of a widely anticipated increase in the price of oil after the election.

There is also widespread disillusionment with the Abdullah administration's unfulfilled pledges. The opposition has highlighted major corruption scandals and the erosion of the integrity of the institutions of governance such as the judiciary, the anti-corruption agency, the EC and the police to maximum effect.

## **Rethink, review**

Malaysia's minorities too are hoping to make their votes count this time. Indian Malaysians have protested against their perceived marginalisation and rallied around the cry of Makkal Sakthi (People Power) while Christians and Hindus are concerned over increasing Islamisation and the demolition of Hindu temples to make way for development projects. They are likely to vote in large numbers for the opposition.

"The feeling on the ground is that some incumbents of the ruling party will not receive

support from non-Muslims for not championing minority religious rights," said Hermen Shastri, the general secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM). In the run-up to polling day, non-Muslim religious places are being used as venues for forums to hold political parties accountable in responding to minority needs, he pointed out.

The 2008 election will either see more of the same in Malaysian politics or set in motion fundamental changes over the longer term - in the approach to race, religion and the whole question of how to run a plural society, says Yang Razali Kassim, a senior fellow of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

"At the core will be an old rivalry between two key personalities - Abdullah (Badawi) vs Anwar (Ibrahim) - and what they each represent," he added.

Abdullah, he noted, defends the status quo in the communal politics of moderation, while Anwar promises a new approach to moderation - without the politics of communalism, and by reconciling the competing fringes of the opposition spectrum.

"Still, the BN's power is entrenched, and Abdullah should not be underestimated," cautioned Yang Razali. "But if the (opposition coalition) under Anwar becomes stronger, Malaysia's long-standing politics of race, ethnicity and pluralism would come under pressure. This would force the BN to rethink and review and come up with new policies - in the same way that 1969 led to major policy shifts." - IPS

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