

Opposition faces daunting rule after poll upsets

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After stunning electoral gains that took them completely by surprise, the opposition now faces the daunting task of running five states and a third of the national parliament. MCPX

The trio of diverse parties, which had formed a loose alliance to confront the Barisan Nasional coalition, had never dreamed of bagging such rich prizes, including the two wealthiest states Selangor and Penang - home to high-brand foreign companies such as Sony and Intel.

Now PKR, party of opposition figurehead Anwar Ibrahim, as well as the Islamic party PAS and the Chinese-dominated DAP, must form workable coalitions to govern.

"We expected to make gains in the polls but not to this extent," admitted PAS policymaker Hatta Ramli, who said the party led by Islamic scholars would work with its new partners to deliver fair and efficient government.

"We have agreed to resolve issues via consensus. We will not go for each other's necks," he said.

PAS has already moved to dispel fears it could exert its ideology over the newly-acquired states, saying it would respect minority rights and that there would not be any dramatic changes for non-Muslims.

The three parties will rule the four swing states - Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor - in various coalitions. PAS also extended its hold in Kelantan, which it had ruled by a thin majority.

Attempt to sabotage

Yeah Kim Leng, group chief economist with RAM Holdings, said that although jittery investors sent the Malaysian bourse tumbling Monday, he did not expect the changeover to affect the economy and industry in key states.

"I don't think there will be any attempt to sabotage the running of the states. It will hurt the Malaysian economy if that happens because their contribution to growth is substantial," he said.

Penang, styled as Malaysia's 'Silicon Valley', is home to electronic giants from the United States, Germany and Japan including Intel, Motorola, Dell and Sony.

Selangor, which surrounds Kuala Lumpur, is Malaysia's most industrialised state with thousands of manufacturing and service-related companies.

Perak and Kedah mainly rely on forestry and agricultural trade.

State media said PAS would appoint chief ministers in Kedah and Perak. The DAP will preside in Penang and a PKR chief minister will run Selangor.

Tricia Yeoh, director of the Centre for Public Policy Studies, said the opposition must ensure their pre-election alliance remains intact.

"They have started internal meetings. They have a clear vision of what they want. They will not squabble as they have strong leaders," she told AFP. "They must ensure they do not fall prey to infighting."

Liberal democracy

Yeoh said the immediate challenge would be to master the running of four new states in which they have no experience, while in the national parliament they must form a stronger check-and-balance to the coalition government.

"The overall challenge is to put Malaysia on the map towards liberal democracy. They should not use their two-third majority to turn parliament into a mere bickering session," she said.

Anwar said late yesterday that the coalition parties would be able to put aside their ideological differences and govern effectively.

He said they would "focus on the economic issue and trying to resolve some of the problems affecting the masses, particularly in the issue of poverty and the normal needs of an average citizen.

"What was promised will be enforced with the best of ability."

Ng Wei Aik, the political secretary to DAP chief Lim Guan Eng who will be Penang's new chief minister, said they must now do the job voters had handed them.

"Our immediate challenge is to gain public confidence and to serve the masses fairly and efficiently. We also need to woo value added investments and provide employment for the locals," he said.

"We can work with PKR and PAS. There is nothing to stop us from doing that."