

Polls shatter race-based politics
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Malaysia's race-based politics has been shattered by a stunning electoral setback for the government, which has been deserted by minority ethnic Chinese and Indians, analysts said today. MCPX

The fractured system under which parties represent either the majority Malays or one of the minority groups looks set to be consigned to history, replaced by a modern two-party system, they said.

"The political landscape in Malaysia has undergone a change," said former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, who has reinvented himself as the opposition figurehead.

"People want to see justice. I could sense that people were fed up with political issues along racial lines," he said after Saturday's polls, which handed the opposition a third of parliamentary seats and four states.

percentage of popular votesThe New Straits Times said the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition - made up of 14 race-based parties - achieved 51.2 percent of the popular vote after support from ethnic Chinese plunged from 65 percent to 35 percent.

Backing from the smaller ethnic Indian community plummeted from 82 percent to 47 percent, while the number of Malays, who form the coalition's bedrock, fell from 63 percent to 58 percent.

Many flocked to Anwar's PKR party, which held just one seat in the outgoing parliament but which will now have 31 lawmakers. The predominantly Chinese DAP has 28 and the Islamic party PAS has 23.

PKR has become Malaysia's first major multi-ethnic party, made up of candidates from all three races and supported by all three - a momentous achievement.

Radical rethinking needed

Meanwhile, the coalition's Chinese and Indian parties have been annihilated, bearing the brunt of anger over the government's handling of inflation as well as mounting ethnic tensions.

"The race-based system is breaking down," said Johan Saravanamuttu from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

percentage of parliament seats"The government is not looking so representative... and may have to re-engineer itself to be much more cognisant of this shift in the way people are voting," he said.

Saravanamuttu said the dominant Umno, which leads the coalition, would have to do a radical rethink about how it could become more inclusive to face the new challenge posed by PKR.

Already there are calls for Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to step down and pave the way for a revamp of the party that has ruled Malaysia for half a century.

"We now face a period of uncertainty such as we have never experienced before," said Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, a former finance minister and Umno veteran.

"People are now saying that Umno has lost its legitimacy to represent the Malays. The other Barisan component parties have already lost their leadership role as representatives of the other major races of this country."

BN as one-party

The Star newspaper's Wong Chun Wai said in an editorial Monday that Barisan Nasional could consider reforming into a one-party, multi-racial organisation.

"In the years to come, convincing younger voters to support a party purely on communal grounds will become tougher," he said.

"A two-party system seems likely to evolve from the outcome of this general election. The first page of the new Malaysian political era opens today."

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