

Making sense of the political tsunami
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Ong Kian Ming

analysis As Malaysians go back to work yesterday, the historic results of the 12th general election are beginning to sink in slowly.

Before the results were announced on Saturday, many people were discussing the possibility of this election being similar to the 1986 general elections where the non-Malay vote swung against Barisan Nasional and the DAP had its best performance where it won 24 out of a possible 172 parliamentary seats.

polling day 080308 voter ballot box 01But it is more apt to compare this election to the last time the BN lost the popular vote in Peninsular Malaysia and failed to capture a two-thirds majority in parliament for what was the first and only time in Malaysia's electoral history, up until now. That was in 1969.

While the Alliance failed to obtain a majority of the popular vote, it still managed to win 67 out of 104 parliamentary seats in Peninsular Malaysia (64.4%), partly aided by the fact that nine parliamentary seats were not contested.

In this election, the BN managed only to win 85 out of 165 parliamentary seats, slightly more than half the parliamentary seats in Peninsular Malaysia (51.5%).

The BN also won a smaller percentage of state seats in Peninsular Malaysia in 2008 compared to 1969. In 1969, the Alliance won 60% of the state seats - 167 out of a possible 279 seats - while in 2008, the BN won only 55% - 247 out of a possible 445 state seats in Peninsular Malaysia.

In 1969, the Alliance failed to win state government in only three states - Kelantan, Penang and Perak while in 2008, the BN failed to form the state government in five states - Kelantan, Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor.

In terms of the overall vote, the BN won 49.8% of the valid vote (without spoilt votes) and 48.7% (including spoilt votes) in 2008, less than half of the total vote. In 1969, the BN won 46.2% of the popular vote (including spoilt votes) and would have won a larger share of the popular vote had there been fewer uncontested seats (since these seats were in BN strongholds)

To put this result in starker terms, the MCA won 13 parliamentary seats in 1969 compared to 13 for the DAP and eight for Gerakan, which was then in opposition. After Gerakan joined the BN, the number of parliamentary seats held by the two Chinese-based parties in the BN was 21 compared to 13 for the Chinese-based opposition.

2008 elections who got what parliament seatIn 2008, Gerakan and MCA won a combined total of 17 parliamentary seats in Peninsular Malaysia, a significant number of which were not Chinese-majority seats while the DAP won 26 parliamentary seats giving them a larger representation in parliament than both MCA and Gerakan combined.

But the largest surprise of 2008 came in the form of PKR, which won 31 parliamentary seats, making it the largest opposition party. For the first time in Malaysia's electoral

history, the leader of the opposition would be a truly multi-ethnic party that have Malay, Chinese and Indian MPs (20 Malay, seven Chinese and four Indian).

This is all the more shocking given that PKR contests mostly in ethnically 'mixed seats' which are traditionally stronghold areas for the BN. Many of these mixed seats which were considered 'unwinnable' seats for the opposition fell like bowling pins including Balik Pulau in Penang, Kelana Jaya in Selangor and Wangsa Maju in Kuala Lumpur.

How did this happen? Why did no one, including myself, see this happening? How can we account for this massive swing towards the opposition?

Why the massive swing?

There are three ways in which I will try to account for this massive swing towards the opposition.

- * The first deals with the hard numbers – on how each ethnic group swung its support towards the opposition in Peninsular Malaysia, and where.

- * The second deals with the psychological underpinnings of this swing – many of the voters themselves probably didn't anticipate such a swing which helps explain why they voted the way they did.

- * The third deals with the issues surrounding the swing and much of the blame has to fall on Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's inability to deliver on his election promises made four years ago in 2004.

Firstly, who swung their votes towards the opposition and by how much.

It was widely anticipated that there would be a swing in the non-Malay votes against the BN but what was not anticipated was the extent of that swing. At the same time, there was no indication that there would be any shift in the Malay support for the BN. Indeed, there were some who speculated that Abdullah had consolidated his hold over the Malay vote and had a chance of winning back Kelantan.

Using a statistical method called ecological inference, theorised by Gary King, who is a professor of government and statistics at Harvard University, I estimated the percentage of BN support by the three main ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia – the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. I found that the Indian vote swing against the BN in Peninsular Malaysia was approximately 35%, the Chinese vote swing was approximately 30% and the Malay vote swing was approximately 5%.

estimated voters swing against bn in peninsular malaysia I also estimated the percentage of the popular vote won by the BN among the various ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia - Malays (58%), Chinese (35%) and Indians (48%).

It is important to highlight that these vote swings are not uniformly distributed. For example, the Malay vote swing in the West Coast states, especially in Penang, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur was higher than the estimated 5% and was closer to 10% or even higher in certain constituencies like Balik Pulau, Gombak and Lembah Pantai. It would not have been

possible for the opposition, PKR in these cases, to win without a sizeable swing in the Malay vote.

The largest swings against the BN came in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, at approximately 21% and 20% respectively, followed by Penang at 17.5%. These swings were across the board swings among Malay, Chinese and Indian voters though the swing among the non-Malays were probably greater than among the Malays. While the Malay vote did not swing much in Terengganu (a small swing of 1.2%), the swing was certainly felt in Kedah (12.7%), a state which is 75% Malay.

change in bn support by stateThe fascinating observation in regards to the Chinese and Indian swing was that it occurred almost regardless of the opposition party in question or the race of that candidate.

Chinese and Indians were happily voting for Malay PKR candidates as well as Malay PAS candidates in addition to Chinese and Indian PKR candidates. This would not have been something that many would have predicted.

Who would have thought that Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad would win in Kuala Selangor, a seat that is only 60% Malay or that PAS would eke out victories in Kota Raja (Selangor) and Titiwangsa (Kuala Lumpur), seats which are barely over 50% Malay? Certainly not me.

At the same time, DAP also won many seats partly because of a greater willingness among Malay voters to vote for the DAP. The DAP probably would not have won in Taiping, Beruas and Teluk Intan (Perak), Seremban (Negri Sembilan) and Segambut (Kuala Lumpur) and Bakri (Johor) if not for the presence of some Malay swing against the BN in these seats.

As such, many opposition wins can be explained by the fact that many voters were willing to vote for the opposition by crossing ethnic boundaries that were previously not possible or seen in very few numbers such as Chinese voting for PAS candidates and Malays voting for DAP candidates.

The tipping point

A second explanation for the extent of the swing is that many voters themselves probably didn't vote thinking that the opposition would do as well as it did. They wanted to cast a protest vote but because of the fear of voicing their opinions and the strict controls on the mainstream media, there was little indication among the elite as well as among the voters that the swing would be as big as it was.

I had been discussing Malcolm Gladwell's book called the 'Tipping Point' with a friend and heard many opposition leaders claiming that such a tipping point was possible in these elections but my conservative instincts stopped me from believing that this was possible. I was wrong. The voters voted and the tipping point was reached and breached, at least in the state of Kelantan, Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor.

It is unlikely that so many voters would have voted for the opposition had they known in advance that the swing was going to be this big and that the state governments in Penang, Kedah, Perak and Selangor would fall. Many of them, especially the non-Malays would have been too fearful of the potential backlash from this happening.

Ironically, the mainstream media's reporting of the BN's confidence in easily securing a

two-thirds majority actually helped the opposition because more voters felt more secure that their protest vote was just that – a protest vote with little significance, at least in terms of causing state governments to fall or previously safe seats to tumble.

The third explanation for this swing has to do with the issues surrounding the 2008 general elections. While many may point to the concerns in regards to the economy, price inflation in urban areas and crime, as main reasons why the voters voted against the BN, one needs to remember that the economy was in much worse shape in 1999, that price inflation has been going on in urban areas for the past 10 years and that crime and safety issues ranked as high concerns in 2004 as well as in 2008.

The major issue, I argue, is that voters voted against the BN as a sign of protest against Abdullah. Abdullah took much of the credit for the historic BN 'sweep' in 2004 and he deserves much of the blame in the historic 'losses' suffered by the BN in 2008. Voters voted against Abdullah because of his inability to deliver on the promises he made in 2004 including the promise to fight corruption, the promise to reform the police force, the promise to be a prime minister for all ethnic groups, and the promise to improve the civil service.

Most voters could not name a significant aspect of the Abdullah administrative post-2004 which effectively 'fought' corruption. MPs who asked custom agents to conveniently overlook excise taxes for imported cars and state assemblymen who built giant mansions for themselves and their families were left unpunished.

The recommendations of the royal commission to improve the police force were left largely ignored. The promise to be a PM to all ethnic groups fell flat in the inability of Abdullah to curb ethnic extremism within his own party, Umno, and to manage the problems concerning conversions out of Islam among non-Malays.

It is extremely difficult for me to think of reasons why Abdullah should not immediately resign as the president of Umno and prime minister of Malaysia given this historic 'defeat' at the polls by the BN and how this would be linked to his failure to deliver on his 2004 messages.

The Malaysian voters should be congratulated on two counts. The first is that they showed tremendous courage in going out to vote for opposition parties and candidates in the face of many 'threats' arising from the BN, including the threat of no representation in the cabinet and the threat of economic instability.

The second is that the voters were measured in their post-election response. They did not take to the streets to celebrate which would have raised the specter of another 'May 13' but instead stayed at home at the prompting of many of the opposition leaders. The BN too, should be congratulated for accepting the results of the general election and not resorting to underhanded tactics (as of now) to try to win back control of certain states or seats. The quick concession by Dr Koh Tsu Koon in Penang is particularly commendable.

This is a clear sign that our electorate and our leaders are becoming more political mature marking Malaysia's gradual move towards a more mature and open democracy.

What next for the opposition?

Even as we discuss why the results were the way they were, it is as if not more important to discuss the implications and questions for the opposition, of which there are many.

How will the DAP govern Penang given that it is the first time that it is holding power at any level of governance? How will it try to resolve the federal-state relationship that PAS has been managing in Kelantan for the past 18 years? Will it be able to attract FDI (foreign direct investments) and federal dollars as an opposition party governing Penang?

How will the opposition in the states other than Kelantan nominate members to the executive council? More importantly, what sort of checks and balances will they have to ensure that their own leaders do not fall victim to the same corrupt practices that are and were practiced by some of the BN MPs and state assemblymen?

How will the opposition leverage its position in the parliament to push through real change in key areas? Will it be able to find agreement between themselves and work with the BN, which still has a majority of parliament seats, to push through comprehensive electoral reform, for example?

Can the opposition deliver its promise to decrease or stop fuel prices from increasing, especially given that huge cost of the oil subsidies which will continue to increase as oil prices increase? Will the opposition pressure the BN to conduct local elections and give up its power to appoint municipal and local authority councillors in the states which it controls?

In addition, can the leaders of the opposition parties work show that they can work together as a viable 'coalition' of sorts and find common ground on national policy? This is important if they are to show that they can not only deny the BN a two-thirds majority but also win enough seats to form a government on their own.

Will PAS strive to implement 'hudud' in Kedah as it tried to do in Terengganu after 1999 or will it adopt a more pragmatic approach and focus on its pre-election promises of providing a free education for all and alleviating poverty? Can the DAP reign in some of their more 'extreme' demands and co-exist with PKR and PAS? Can PKR effectively bridge some of the gaps between DAP and PAS now that it is the largest party in the opposition?

What role will Anwar Ibrahim play in the opposition? Will he stand in a by-election in Permatang Pauh once he is eligible to run again? How hard will he push in certain 'sensitive' areas such as his promise to abolish the New Economic Policy and replace it with a more equitable system of wealth redistribution or helping the poor?

These are but a few of the hundreds of questions and challenges that the opposition will face in the coming weeks and months.

One thing is for certain, if the opposition doesn't get its act together, look for the same voters who voted against the BN to turn their backs on the opposition in the next election.