

**Election post-mortem : top 10 factors**  
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Few expected that the wave of protest would snowball into the record losses for the Barisan National. My own analysis was the gains would be at maximum 70 seats and two state governments, not the record five state governments and 82 seats for the opposition. MCPX

While the ground swell of disgruntlement was there, concerns about electoral fairness and persistent patterns of ethnic voting dampened the optimism, even among the opposition. Yet, the record breaking losses for the BN have created a fundamental rupture in Malaysian politics.

Based on following the campaign and the generosity of ordinary people and political elites sharing their views, here are my top 10 reasons for the outcome:

**1. Reformasi spirit lives on**

1The BN severely miscalculated in its assessment of the Malaysian electorate. In 2004, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi embraced the reform agenda that catapulted into the electoral agenda in the 1999 election.

The fight against corruption, increased transparency, and, most important, better governance underscored his 2004 campaign. Recall the advertisements for a more effective civil service, and the focus on building on his 'Mr Clean' persona.

Coupled with Abdullah's affable personal style and the groundswell of goodwill, Malaysians embraced his leadership, giving him then a record mandate. But the mandate was not just about Abdullah the man, it was also about the issues that he used to get himself and the BN elected.

The 2004 campaign was filled with promises of reform of the police to address crime and pledges to reduce corruption. Not only were these promises not fulfilled, the problems have been seen to deepen during his tenure as reform efforts were abandoned and anti-corruption efforts were selectively applied.

Many in the 2008 BN slate continued to have questions about alleged corruption, from S Samy Vellu (Maika scandal) to others close to the prime minister. These charges were not investigated, and in fact with the continued selection of candidates this round with corruption clouds, the Abdullah administration failed to show a commitment to address the problems it acknowledged in 2004.

At the core, Malaysians want - and deserve - a better government. The spirit of reform remained alive and kicked back in this election.

**2. Abdullah's laissez-faire lackluster leadership**

2Abdullah brought about a profound transformation in liberalising the political system, allowing more voices to be heard, and graciously accepting the electoral results. In these

areas, he deserves high praise.

Yet, he failed in the key area that has been the backbone of the BN's legitimacy - economic performance. The macro numbers in Malaysia are strong and the country remains one of the most competitive for investment regionally. Yet, it is falling behind in maintaining competitiveness and the economic gains are not being effectively distributed to the population.

Abdullah's administration corresponded to high inflation - the highest since the early 70s. Inequality is rising sharply and ordinary people, notably the middle-class based in the urban areas, are feeling the pinch. Even though commodity prices have brought more wealth to the rural areas, it is not keeping up with rising costs. This was brought home to me with conversations with Malay rubber tappers in Larut, Perak, who supported PAS in record numbers.

In fairness, the rising prices are the result of an appreciating ringgit, rising oil prices and high government subsidies, issues that are either out of Abdullah's control or he inherited. Yet, his economic team proved not able to manage domestic prices effectively and translate the oil and gas revenue into gains for society at large that could be felt in ordinary households.

The recent Hari Raya, Chinese New Year and Deepavali holidays were noticeably less plush than before, a real sign of fiscal difficulties. Wages have comparatively dropped and those working in the service sector make barely enough to survive. The starting take-home salary at 7-Eleven is RM700 a month. Unemployment among younger people remains too high, and not all of them can be absorbed into the civil service.

Difficult conditions are compared sharply to the wealth of the political elite, including Abdullah and his family with a reported new home in Perth. The conspicuous display of consumption of the elite is on display from the rural areas of Perak to the Kuala Lumpur shopping malls.

Beyond the bread-and-butter issues, was a more serious dynamic - the inability to instill confidence in promoting long-term economic development, increasing Malaysia's economic competitiveness. The economic vision was missing in Abdullah's first term, and the fiscal liquidity in the country was not adequately invested locally.

The economic reforms needed to bring about the changes were not pursued with the zeal to keep Malaysia ahead of countries like Vietnam. In particular, Malaysia faces the difficult task of making its domestic business entrepreneurs more competitive. This involves weaning them off a dependence on contracts. This is true for both the Malay and Chinese business communities alike.

Abdullah's administration strengthened its use of patronage, and did not send a clear message to end wasteful big projects. The new economic corridors have yet to be shown to be effective allocations of resources, rather than avenues for elite economic gain. Malaysia did not aggressively pursue trade liberalisation in a means to attract more foreign capital.

Moreover, the much-needed reforms in education, to strengthen Malaysia's human capital, were not effectively implemented, although good ideas were touted. Investors want confidence, and effective policy implementation.

Abdullah's decision-making style has yet to yield the results his 2004 mandate should have

given him. The ideas were developed, but not implemented. The talent in Malaysia is there, but Abdullah was not able to effectively harness it. The BN is fooling itself if it thinks the electorate does not appreciate the larger issues that affect their children's futures.

### **3. BN coalition failings and infighting**

Abdullah's poor management extended to the BN itself. The component parties within the BN were dismissed and ignored. Whether this involved the PGCC (Penang Global City Centre) project in Penang in which the opposition of Gerakan to the project was completely by-passed or the memorandum on Article 11 that the parties were forced to withdraw, the perception was created that voices for non-Malays in the coalition were not being heard.

Umno came across as too arrogant within the coalition. This came to a head in the Hindraf affair, when voices within the system rejected the concerns of ordinary voices and added salt to the wound by arresting the Indian Malaysian leaders. This seriously delegitimised the MIC as the voice of the Indian Malaysian community. It is not a coincidence that Devamany S Krishasamy, the MP from Cameron Highlands, who had the bravery to at least acknowledge concerns, was reelected and Samy Vellu, who justified the arrests, lost.

The issue of problematic BN management extended to the dominant party within the BN itself, Umno. Abdullah came into office without a strong political base within his party. The party rallied around him in the office of the PM, yet he continued to face dissension inside. Rumours of rifts between him and his deputy Najib Razak continued, and were denied as in fact their working relationship was overall sound in the first term.

Yet, the dissension continued to percolate, with former premier Dr Mahathir Mahathir leading the charge. The March polls were not just about national elections, they were also about positioning for the next Umno elections. In this regard, the March polls were used as a means to strengthen Abdullah and his allies positions within the party.

Mentri besars were given much more influence over the candidate slates. Popular candidates, those that hold important division chief positions within Umno, were dropped. It is no wonder the Umno machinery did not work as effectively in this election compared to the last. As one Umno elite described it, there were too many "fronts" opened this campaign to mend. The impact of Umno infighting is most obvious historically in Kelantan, but can account for losses elsewhere and reduced majorities even in safe areas such as Perlis.

The divisions within Umno were paralleled by splits within the other important component parties. For the MCA, the battle over leadership was already on the agenda before the election and the ouster of Chua Soi Lek, distancing of Chan Kong Choy and rise of Ong Ka Chuan, the brother of the party's president have created serious ripples within the party.

The MCA knew defeat was coming, but not as serious as the outcome. They slated the least number of incumbents - 35% - due to infighting and the difficult Chinese electoral terrain. The MCA's loss in the urban areas shows that they lost both Chinese and English-educated Chinese, the latter of which have not been effectively included in Ong Ka Ting's tenure.

The MIC's crisis is well-known, as a similar dynamic over succession permeated the election, and the record number of new candidates for the MIC only served to have MIC fight itself in places like Perai in Penang. Gerakan's internal difficulties in the chief ministership issue were also on public display, although for the purposes of the election, the party maintained unity - to no avail.

#### **4. Better messaging by the opposition**

4It is thus not surprising that the BN campaign lacked a coherence. In reading the messages about its record, the issues raised were disparate and lacked focus. While clearly polished posters and top printing quality, the BN content did not resonate clearly. The messages used in different states did not fit clearly under one umbrella, such as Umno's focus on it being the party of the struggle for Islam in Terengganu and Kelantan.

In fact, many of the messages belied the experience of ordinary Malaysians - end of poverty? clean police force? prices least in the region? The connection to society was missing. The tone of the campaign was one in which the voices of society were not listened to, and people were talked down to.

Many pointed to the arrogance of the BN in its campaign - highlighting the 'One Choice' poster as a fundamental lack of appreciation that there was another choice in this campaign, a choice that the majority of the electorate chose. The defensive posture of the BN campaign failed to offer hope to the electorate. "Be grateful for what you have" does not evoke support in a context of increased economic difficulties.

In comparison, the opposition was united in promoting one message of "change". While they differed in their priorities of what they wanted to change, they all concurred on introducing more checks and balances in the system. Each party had a common template and umbrella that allowed candidates that were unknown to build on the individual party's identity.

The message was modest in goals and a positive message. This more effective messaging allowed the opposition to reach out to new voters, and convinced many Malaysians to vote outside of ethnic lines.

#### **5. Embracing modern campaigning: New mediums**

5A critical component of the opposition's stronger campaign was its more aggressive move to modern campaign techniques. While Malaysia elections continue to be labour intensive affairs, with house-to-house campaigning the norm, the use of polling of the electorate and the embrace of the Internet, blogs and SMS worked more the advantage for the opposition.

The opposition was denied balanced coverage in the mainstream media, and thus was forced to adopt new campaign techniques for greater penetration of their message. PAS was perhaps the most effective of all the opposition parties in using its website to reach out to its supporters, with its candidates profiled early on. Yet, PKR and DAP were also close behind, using email list-serves and YouTube. The uploading of ceramah allowed a wider audience to hear their message.

The BN lacked the same level of adoption of these techniques. In part, it believed that control over the media and resources would work. This is understandable. They have worked in the past. Yet, Malaysia is no longer the same place. Now 42 percent of Malaysians reportedly use the Internet, and they have access to alternative opinions.

No matter what level of control over blogging the government introduces, they cannot control cyberspace. The BN will need to adjust its campaigning methods to reach out

effectively, especially to younger voters.

## **6. Timing of election and campaign period**

The long campaign worked in favour of the opposition, not the government. This has to do in part with the cheaper means to conduct campaigns noted above - CD's, Internet and SMS are cheaper than paying campaign workers.

Yet the longer campaign period - the longest since 1969 - allowed the opposition to get its message out, to respond to the issues that the BN were raising. Instead of a blast in which the focus was on a few key messages, candidates from all parties had to adapt and change their messages as the campaign evolved.

This was most evident in Penang, where the response of outgoing chief minister Dr Koh Tsu Koon to the issue of the state's future leadership, provided fodder to the opposition during the campaign itself. The BN proved less willing to adapt as the campaign evolved.

Thirteen is clearly not Abdullah's lucky number. This election was called too early. While there is no doubt that economic pressures would have made the context difficult, the possible international recession might have given Abdullah more ability to deflect blame. As is, he alone was faced with an assessment of his economic management.

The scheduling of the elections only a few months after Hindraf and during the Chinese New Year celebrations did not help build confidence among non-Malays. Rushing the seat allocation within the coalition contributed to internal BN disgruntlement. More policies should have been implemented to address ethnic relations and more efforts to address the infighting within the coalition needed to be done before the election. The election was clearly poorly timed.

## **7. Opposition cooperation**

The opposition is comprised of three different political parties with different political outlooks and philosophies. It is also comprised of strong personalities. After the DAP left the Barisan Alternatif in 2001, the divide between the opposition parties widened, as the ideological differences over Islamic governance split the DAP and PAS, and even had ripple effects within PKR.

Bringing the opposition together into the non-aggression pact of this election and the common umbrella was a massive effort, led by members within all the parties who recognised that national gains were not possible without cooperation.

All the parties needed cooperation to win new ground - DAP in Penang, PAS in Kedah and all the parties in Selangor and Perak. The seat negotiations were heated and difficult, but in West Malaysia successful. All the party leaders are responsible for this success. It involved moving PAS away from an openly Islamist agenda, which it adopted in the 2004 campaign, and all the parties to embrace multiracialism.

Operationally, cooperation involved joint PKR-DAP and PKR-PAS ceramah and on the ground canvassing, in which PKR and Anwar Ibrahim in particular brought parties together. For the campaign, the common goal of breaking two-thirds majority blinded the opposition to the ideological differences within itself and instilled more party discipline in all the parties.

Electorally, the opposition was seen as a viable alternative as the opposition, not individual parties.

## **8. Strong opposition candidates**

8The opposition also slated strong articulate candidates who spoke about the issues. From Nurul Izzah Anwar's discussion of housing, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad's attention to education and Liew Chin Tong's focus on the chief ministership issue to Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad Nawawi's highlight of the royalty disbursement in Terengganu, the candidates in the opposition spoke concretely about concerns in their constituencies.

The opposition is now comprised of a greater number of professionals - up to over 45% - and now includes businessmen such as incoming PKR MB of Selangor Khalid Ibrahim as well as social activists such as Dr Lee Boon Chye in Perak. Those that have stayed in the opposition and joined the parties after the heyday of 1999 are deeply committed to the principles the opposition calls for. While lacking in governing experience, there is talent and many who listened to the ceramah recognised this.

This is not to say that the BN did not slate capable candidates. The share of professionals remained high - over 30% - and the parties have extraordinarily capable people. Yet, the few that are tainted by scandals spoil the chances for others. Clean politicians within the BN - and there are many hardworking representatives within the BN - are negatively affected by the image that BN governance is about gaining wealth, not public service.

This time round, even the hardest working parliamentarians such as Chew Mei Fun, could not meet the challenge of the younger dynamic slate for change.

## **9. Backfire from attack on Anwar Ibrahim**

9If there was one serious miscalculation that took place during the campaign, it was the attack on Anwar Ibrahim. Personal in nature, it was seen as unfair, especially in the Malay community.

No question, there are real concerns among many Malaysians about Anwar Ibrahim's tenure in government - from issues of education to Islamic governance. He will have to continue to build confidence in the Malaysian electorate to those who have reservations about this leadership in the opposition.

Yet, the attack on Anwar provoked a reaction, particularly among Malays. It reignited the 1999 reformasi spirit, and only served to add credibility to his influence nationally. Here, the BN served to alienate many Malays through negative campaigning, rather than convince the electorate to support its message of development.

## **10. Sophistication of Malaysian electorate**

10Finally, and it is finally (with apologies for the length of this article), the 2008 election illustrated the strengthening of Malaysian identity and growing sophistication of the electorate.

Gone are the days when resources and promises alone can woo support - except perhaps in East Malaysia. Malaysians want more responsiveness and voices, and they used this campaign to stand in the majority for change. They no longer can be talked down to, but need to be listened and heard, not just during the election.

The leadership in both the opposition and the BN will have to keep this in mind, as the terrain has fundamentally changed.

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