

# Malaysia enters uncertainty after poll

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## NEWS ANALYSIS

**Delicate relations between the ethnic Malay majority and the Chinese and Indian minorities are set to be tested, writes John Burton**

The widely expressed comment that Malaysia's general elections at the weekend caused a political earthquake may be a cliché, but the metaphor is apt.

Malaysia's political landscape has been shaped by the underground stresses of ethnic tensions and income disparity for decades, but it has been difficult to predict when it would produce sudden shifts in public mood.

The fact that the greatest upheaval occurred this year during an election campaign that was considered boring even by Malaysia's staid standards took almost everyone by surprise.

But an aide to Abdullah Badawi, the prime minister, admitted before the election that the government was sensing that public frustration was reaching "the psychological breaking point"

over the failure to curb corruption, crime and inflation.

With the long-ruling National Front government severely weakened, the country has entered uncharted political waters.

The huge protest vote that gave a third of parliamentary seats and an unprecedented five state governments to the opposition is seen as a victory for democracy in a country that has been ruled by a semi-authoritarian government since independence in 1957. Such an outcome would have been dismissed as political fantasy just a week ago.

The results could lead to a period of fragmented government and will test the delicate relations between the ethnic Malay majority and the Chinese and Indian minorities.

Mr Abdullah is seen as perhaps fatally weakened and his chances of surviving party elections this year as head of the United Malays National Organisation, the coalition government's dominant partner that selects the prime minister, are questionable.

The result "will expose the latent tensions between Abdullah and Najib Razak", the deputy prime minister, said Yang Razali Kassim at

the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

Mr Najib is seen as being favoured by the Umno old guard that wants to entrench the programme of preferential treatment of the Malay majority. The programme was criticised by minorities as discriminatory, which led to their overwhelming support for the opposition that campaigned against it.

The hand of Umno hardliners may be strengthened by the virtual elimination from the National Front of

the two junior coalition partners that represented minority interests.

However, the sharp rebuke delivered to the government "was a revolt among all of Malaysia's races against mismanagement and corruption and I think that Najib, if he becomes the new leader, will have to crack down on entrenched interests if he wants the National Front to recover," said Ooi Kee Beng, of the Institute of South-East Asian Studies in Singapore.

Possible economic reforms could include awarding government contracts by open tender instead of granting them to businesses closely allied to the National Front. The issue of public procurement has held up a proposed trade deal with the US.

Analysts believe the opposition state governments will push for open procurement locally, although they may encounter problems in relations with the federal government on other issues, such as new economic development zones being planned in several of the states.

Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition leader, will also face challenges as he attempts to keep together a three-party opposition alliance that includes such disparate elements as the secular

Chinese-based Democratic Action party and the conservative Islam party that previously campaigned for the introduction of strict Muslim laws. Mr Anwar's People's Justice party is seen as a bridge between the two other groups.

Co-operation will be tested as the three parties share power in several state governments they won. "I think there is tremendous goodwill among them to succeed," said Bridget Welsh, of Johns Hopkins University. "We have already seen one fundamental transformation in that voters were willing to cross ethnic lines to support opposition candidates."

Mr Ooi said: "If Anwar succeeds in making the opposition work effectively together, I think there is a good chance that the opposition could defeat the government at the next election and he will be the next prime minister." The opposition would have to gain another 30 seats to capture power at the next polls, which are due by 2013.

Mr Anwar has promised to dismantle the policy of preferential treatment for Malays and replace it with a programme focusing on eliminating poverty among all racial groups.

## The result

Seats won (last election)

National Front	140 (199)
People's Justice party	31 (1)
Democratic Action party	28 (12)
Islamic Party of Malaysia	23 (6)
Independent	0 (1)

*The total number of seats is 222. In the last election there were 219 seats*