

Opposition's gains in Malaysia signal an era of change

Politics won't 'ever be the same again'

By Thomas Fuller

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KUALA LUMPUR: A decade ago, they were writing letters to each other from prison. Now two leaders of the Malaysian opposition, Anwar Ibrahim and Lim Guan Eng, are poised to do something no one has done in the five decades since the country gained independence from Britain: wrest control of its largest and wealthiest states from the long-running governing coalition.

Malaysia's National Front has dominated politics so thoroughly for 50 years that the country has effectively been a one-party state. But major advances in elections Saturday by three opposition parties, quadrupling the number of their seats in Parliament, open the door to a new era of checks and balances, analysts say — perhaps even to a two-party system.

In what was called a political tsunami here, the National Front won just 51.2 percent of the popular vote, giving it enough seats to remain in power. But the coalition lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time since 1969 — and with it, the right to amend the Constitution freely, which it has done 40 times in 50 years.

The governing coalition also lost control of Selangor, Penang, Kedah and Perak, which are among the largest states in the country. With Kelantan, which was the only state in opposition hands before the elections, opposition parties now control 5 out of 13 states, which is unprecedented.

"I don't think Malaysian politics will ever be the same again," said Anwar as he returned to Kuala Lumpur late Saturday night from his native Penang, where Lim, his fellow opposition member, will soon be sworn in as chief minister, or governor.



How Hwee Young/EPA

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said he did not see coalition losses as a vote of no confidence.

In the 1990s, both Anwar and Lim were sentenced to prison sentences in highly politicized trials, Anwar for sodomy and abuse of power and Lim for sedition. The opposition they now lead vows to challenge the paternalistic practices of a government that controls the mainstream media, severely curtails freedom of assembly, bars students from taking part in politics and jails political opponents, sometimes without trial.

"There is a wave, an outcry for democratic reform," Anwar said. His National Justice Party now controls Selangor, the state adjacent to Kuala Lumpur, the commercial capital. The opposition also captured Kuala Lumpur, winning 10 of its 11 parliamentary seats.

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Malaysia vote points to era of checks and balances

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With a few seats yet to be decided, the governing coalition had 137 and the opposition 82 of the 222 seats in Parliament. Analysts say the National Front's core support is much lower, because the coalition's totals include the 51 seats of Sabah and Sarawak, the northern Borneo states that have a political culture distinct from peninsular Malaysia's and could foreseeably shift loyalties in the event of a breakup of the coalition.

The biggest loser in the election appears to have been Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who dissolved Parliament in February, one year before the five-year deadline. When he came to power in 2003, Abdullah, who leads the United Malays National Organization, the country's main ethnic Malay party, staked his reputation on eliminating corruption and streamlining government, policies that voters seem to have deemed failures.

Mahathir Mohamad, the long-serving prime minister who hand-picked Abdullah as his successor, said Sunday at his home that Abdullah should "accept responsibility" for the loss and that if he were in the prime minister's place he would resign.

"It's shocking," Mahathir said of the election results. "The Japanese would have committed hara-kiri."

"I'm sorry that I apparently made the wrong choice," Mahathir said of his successor.

Abdullah was defiant. He said in a nationally televised news conference

that he would seek an audience with the Malaysian king Monday to form the next national government.

Responding to a reporter's question, he denied that the coalition's losses had been a vote of no confidence for the government. "I don't see it that way," he said. He also said he felt no pressure to step down.

"I don't know who is being pressured," he said. "I'm not resigning."

Although initially very popular when he came to power — his approval ratings were above 90 percent — Abdullah has lost support after a series of scandals, religious disputes and heightened controversy over the long-running system of economic preferences for Malays.

The country's ethnic Indians, who make up less than 10 percent of the population, were especially angry at Abdullah over the jailing of five Indian activists after a rare street protest was broken up by the riot police in November.

One of the five activists, M. Manoharan, who was being held without trial under a colonial-era security law, was elected to a state legislature Saturday in a clear sign of defiance toward Abdullah and the government. It is unclear how Manoharan, if he remains incarcerated, will carry out his duties.

Critics of Abdullah portray him as sleepy and out of touch. Mahathir and others accuse him of dynastic tendencies, saying he favors his son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin.

The loss of Penang, which alone

among Malaysia's 13 states has a majority of Chinese voters, is a personal blow to Abdullah, whose constituency is based there. The state is a major industrial center, producing microchips, mobile phones and computer parts in factories owned by Intel, Dell and Motorola, among others.

Losing control of states is a considerable setback for the governing coalition, because states in Malaysia's national

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system have jurisdiction over a host of matters including land allocation, local town councils and Islamic laws. They can also, to a certain degree, lure and negotiate directly with foreign investors, bypassing the central government.

Public anger has been growing for years over inefficient local governments. "What we've seen over the last couple of years is immense corruption due to unfairly given procurement," said Tricia Yeoh, director of the Center for Public Policy Studies, a research organization in Kuala Lumpur. "Local councils are one of the primary areas of wastage and corruption."

The opposition parties unseated several political veterans by fielding fresh but inexperienced candidates, including a political science professor, a popu-

lar blogger and a human rights advocate. The departing governor of Penang, Koh Tsu Koon, lost his seat Saturday to a dissident university professor, P. Ramasamy.

The leaders of the two ethnic Indian parties represented in the governing coalition also lost their seats, including the only ethnic Indian in the cabinet, Samy Vellu.

Those losses call into question the future of the country's race-based coalition, a system in place since independence in which each major ethnic group — Malays, Chinese and Indians — is represented by its own political party.

Opposition leaders have vowed to move Malaysia away from this system, with Anwar's multiracial National Justice Party the loudest proponent of the change.

Anwar, 60, who many see as a possible future prime minister, is barred from holding public office until April because of his conviction for abuse of power. But both his wife and daughter won seats in the national Parliament on Saturday.

He said in an interview Saturday that he did not rule out the possibility of asking a member of his party to resign so he can run in a by-election. "I'm not in a hurry," said Anwar, whose party won 31 seats Saturday, up from just one seat in the last election in 2004.

Anwar's path back into public life began in 2004, when he was released after six years in prison. In 1999, Anwar, who is Malay, and Lim, who is ethnic Chinese, exchanged letters from their respective cells.

"Through it all, despite our differences, I sense that we both share the same reforming zeal — reforming the political system to make government more accountable, to make democracy more participatory and make our political culture more ethical and moral," Lim wrote to Anwar.

Today they face what for many of their followers is a novel challenge: transforming themselves from gadflies into leaders and managers. Their greatest expertise until now has been the art of dissent in a semiauthoritarian country.

While Anwar has experience in government — he held a number of cabinet posts when he was with the governing party — Lim and his Democratic Action Party have none. The Pan-Islamic Party, the third party in the opposition, has ruled rural, ethnically homogeneous and relatively impoverished Kelantan since 1990, but it must now show that it is capable of managing a wealthier and more diverse state like Kedah.

The opposition as a whole must show that a Chinese, multiracial and Islamic party can work together on national issues — no mean feat, given their religious and ethnic differences.

"This term of office is make or break for them," said Yeoh of the Center for Public Policy Studies.

"What is essentially needed is for them to get down to the negotiating table, work out common policies, work out the nitty-gritty administrative details," Yeoh said.