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Malaysia's shift

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The elections on Saturday had not quite broken the mold of Malaysian politics as it has existed since independence 50 years ago. But the scale of the setback for the governing coalition of race-based parties raises opportunities for the country to move away from a system that has provided stability but become little more than a patronage machine that has failed to respond adequately to a changing society.

Most remarkably, the swing to the opposition occurred among both rural and urban Malay voters, and among the Chinese and Indian ones. Though it still has a substantial majority in Parliament, thanks to a skewed system, the governing coalition, known as the National Front, got barely more than 50 percent of the vote. It now has control of only 8 of the 13 states.

Malay voters migrated more to the multiracial but predominantly Malay party of the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and to the main Islamist party. Indians and Chinese deserted coalition parties in hordes.

The result was a particular triumph for Anwar. His People's Justice Party, known as the PKR, now has more seats than the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which has long been the main, predominantly Chinese opposition party, and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, known as the PAS.

But the opposition triumph carries dangers as well as opportunities. The most immediate danger is that members of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the main ethnic Malay party that leads the governing coalition, will try to heap the majority of blame on Prime minister Abdullah Badawi.

For sure, Abdullah has been a weak leader whose promises to attack corruption and restore faith in government have not been fulfilled. Most Malaysians still seem to think he has good intentions but has not been strong enough to tackle the huge vested interests in the status quo.

The first to demand Abdullah's resignation was his predecessor, Mahathir Mohamad. But it was during Mahathir's 23-year rule that the patronage system and abuse of power became institutionalized. The track records of his likely successors in the UMNO hierarchy show that they are even less likely to try to reform the patronage system or address the grievances of the non-Malays. In particular, a murder case hangs over the deputy prime minister and defense

minister, Najib Abdul Razak.

Another danger is that UMNO will now attempt to regain Malay voters by appealing to baser race and religious instincts in order to try to outflank PAS and PKR.

Thus, with these results, it's possible that Malaysian politics could become even more racially polarized, exposing

The opposition triumphs in elections, but will that make a difference?

the divides among the three opposition parties that must now manage to cooperate. That will not be easy given that PAS is a religion-based Malay party, the DAP a left-of-center, mainly Chinese party, and PKR a middle of the road but mainly Malay one.

Much may depend on the skill and ambitions of Anwar. His appeal has been re-established and his party holds the middle ground. But his liberal, multiracial views have at times been at odds with the political rewards of emphasizing an overtly Malay and Islamic agenda.

Beyond the dangers are opportunities. Short-term issues like crime and inflation played a role in the government's defeat, overshadowing an economy booming on the back of record commodity prices and a surge in government spending. But these cannot explain the size and generality of the swing that occurred everywhere except in the east Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak — where, ironically, race and religion are not such fraught issues as in peninsular Malaysia.

Among all races, there is now a realization that preferential policies intended to bring the Malays to socioeconomic equality have in many cases just become a way of enriching the UMNO elite. Among all races, perhaps there is also a recognition that government must make more effort to focus on Malaysian rather than communal or religious identity.

PAS, hitherto only in power in poor, conservative Malay Kelantan, will now find itself in government in the richer, more urbanized, states where non-Malays (and foreigners) are numerous. The experience will broaden its outlook, which was already shifting due to the need to increase its appeal to urban Malays, and not to frighten non-Malay

voters into taking refuge with the coalition.

It is too early to tell whether there has been a fundamental change in the mainsprings of Malaysian politics. But there is now some prospect that issues other than race and religion will take more prominence; that class, quality of administration and economic issues will play a larger role.

At the very least, the UMNO patronage system, the mix of greed, arrogance and nepotism that comes from 50 years in power, has been undermined by an increasingly aware electorate, now fed news by the Internet as well as the government-controlled media. For that, Abdullah must take some credit. He may have been unable to stop the rot within, but a greater openness compared with the Mahathir era made it easier to expose abuses.

In the coming months Malaysia will be living with more uncertainties: Can Abdullah survive? Can UMNO reform from within? Can the opposition parties now in state government cooperate? It will be unsettling, but it is necessary. The old mold needs to be broken.