

Victors to halt pro-Malay race policy

117-12/3/2008

The Associated Press

PENANG, Malaysia: Malaysia's opposition-governed states will no longer follow an affirmative-action program that benefits ethnic Malays, top leaders said Tuesday in a major reversal of policy after an election upheaval clipped the governing coalition's powers.

A three-party opposition alliance won control of the governments in 5 of Malaysia's 13 states in elections Saturday, the biggest loss for the governing National Front since independence from Britain in 1957.

The result in part reflected anger among the country's sizable ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities over social and racial inequalities.

The clearest policy reversals were announced by Lim Guan Eng, who was sworn in Tuesday as the chief minister of the northern state of Penang, which is dominated by ethnic Chinese. The industrial state is the site of many multinational electronics companies such

as Intel and Dell, and is also known as the country's tourism jewel.

Lim said his government will do away with the New Economic Policy, the 37-year-old affirmative-action program for Malays, in awarding state contracts.

"We will run the government administration free from the New Economic Policy that breeds cronyism, corruption and systemic inefficiency," Lim, an ethnic Chinese, told reporters.

In other reforms, Lim said all state government members and civil servants will be required to publicly declare their assets.

"This is a government that is based on democracy. This is also a government that believes in equal opportunity and social economic justice. We are here to build a dynamic Penang for all," he said.

Following the elections, Lim's Democratic Action Party, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party and the People's Justice Party of Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister, formed coalitions

governments in the states of Penang, Kedah, Perak and Selangor.

The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party will rule by itself in Kelantan State, which it has held for the past 18 years.

It was the first time the National Front had given up control of so many states.

At the federal level, the opposition increased its strength in Parliament to 82 from 19, leaving the National Front with a simple majority of 140 seats in the 222-member house.

Anwar told reporters in Kuala Lumpur that the opposition did not have the power to abolish the New Economic Policy nationwide.

But in the five opposition-governed states, the governments will "reduce race-based affirmative-action policies and begin to implement a more competitive merit-based system," Anwar said.

He said that the five states will try to ensure that the poor among all races receive benefits such as low-cost homes and education, and that affirmative-action policies become obsolete.