

# Malaysia ruling coalition dealt big election setback

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*Country may become a model for change in the Islamic world*

BY YAROSLAV TROFIMOV

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia—A half-century of political domination by Malaysia's powerful National Front coalition crumbled over the weekend as voters dealt the government its harshest electoral setback since the country gained independence in 1957.

The stunning election results raised the prospect that Malaysia—one of the world's most economically advanced Muslim-majority nations and America's 10th-largest trade partner—could become a model of peaceful democratic change in the Islamic world.

Although the National Front mustered just enough seats to form the next national government, it lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time in almost 40 years.

Exceeding its most optimistic forecasts, an alliance of three oppo-



Prime Minister **Abdullah Ahmad Badawi** said yesterday he doesn't need to step down after the stunning rebuke Malaysian voters dealt his ruling coalition.

sition parties also secured control of five of Malaysia's 13 state administrations. The opposition now controls the crucial states of Penang and Selangor, home to much of Malaysia's industrial base and to billions of dollars in U.S. and other foreign investments.

"This is a major political earthquake," said Ibrahim Suffian, executive director of polling firm Merdeka Center in Kuala Lumpur. "The monopoly of power has now been broken."

Near-total government control over Malaysia's broadcast and print

*Please turn to back page*

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Continued from first page

media, strict restrictions on public protests, and wide-ranging security powers historically used to jail opposition activists have long helped ensure easy electoral victories for the National Front. The government's long-standing two-thirds majority in Parliament has also allowed it to amend the country's constitution at will and to alter electoral constituencies to favor coalition incumbents. Until this weekend's election, the National Front held more than 90% of federal Parliament seats and ran 12 of 13 state administrations.

But the spread of uncensored new media, such as the Internet and cellphone text messaging, helped opposition parties to break the government's stranglehold on information flow, harnessing public anger over mounting inflation, widespread corruption and inept governance. Combined with rising resentment by ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities over long-standing affirmative-action policies designed to benefit the country's Muslim ethnic Malay majority, this anger coalesced into a perfect storm of protest against Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's government.

Mr. Badawi is now facing growing pressure to step down. The National Front "has been defeated and shamed on a scale without precedent in our history. The leadership team must wake up from its slumber, face the truth and accept full responsibility for the debacle," urged Razaleigh Hamzah, a former deputy prime minister and a prominent National Front lawmaker.

Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who named Mr. Badawi to replace him in 2003, also demanded the premier's head, accusing him of "destroying" the National Front.

Mr. Badawi, whose home state of Penang was swept by the opposition, so far has insisted he has no intention of stepping down. "I will not resign because there is no pressure," the national news agency quoted him yesterday as saying. It also reported that Mr. Badawi said he will be sworn in today at the national palace for a new five-year term.

Like all of Malaysia's prime ministers since 1957, Mr. Abdullah belongs to the United Malays National Organization, the dominant party in the National Front. UMNO is dedicated to furthering the interests of ethnic Malays, who make up around 60% of Malaysia's population of 26 million.

UMNO governs Malaysia through its control of the National Front, which also includes smaller parties representing ethnic Chinese and Indians. It has created one of the world's most extensive systems of ethnic quotas that give the Muslim Malays preferences in everything from education and jobs to housing and stock ownership.

It was a former UMNO deputy chief turned opposition firebrand, Anwar Ibrahim, who emerged as the biggest winner of the weekend's elections—even though he didn't even run for office himself.

Mr. Anwar, a former deputy prime minister, spent six years in prison on corruption and sodomy charges after falling out with then Prime Minister Mahathir in 1998. He has rejected the charges as politically motivated, and the sodomy conviction was eventually overturned.

The corruption verdict, however, prevented Mr. Anwar from standing for public office until April 14, 2008—a key reason why Prime Minister Abdullah decided to hold the elections more than a year before the government's existing electoral mandate expired in 2009.

Mr. Abdullah's decision backfired: Even though Mr. Anwar couldn't be a candidate, his multi-ethnic, secular People's Justice Party, known by its Malay acronym PKR, became the biggest opposition group in the 222-member federal Parliament, adding 30 seats to the one it already held.

Blasting Malaysia's system of ethnic quotas as unfair to minorities and benefiting only UMNO kingpins, the PKR garnered especially strong support in multi-ethnic, middle-class regions such as capital city Kuala Lumpur and the adjoining state of Selangor, where the party will form the next administration. In one contest, Mr. Anwar's 27-year-old daughter de-

feated an UMNO stalwart.

Mr. Anwar has already said he may seek a seat in Parliament in a by-election after the prohibition barring him from office expires next month. Once in Parliament, Mr. Anwar could become the official head of opposition—a role that would position him to make a credible bid for national power in the next elections should the opposition consolidate and expand its own coalition.

"The people have expressed in no uncertain terms that they want accountability, transparency and the rule of law," Mr. Anwar said after this weekend's vote. "The people have voted decisively for a new era where the government must be truly inclusive and recognizes all Malaysians, regardless of religion, culture or race are a nation of one."

The opposition's strong showing at the polls was largely due to Mr. Anwar's success in orchestrating an unlikely three-way alliance with the two other main opposition parties that are rooted in starkly different ideologies and ethnic affiliations. One is the predominantly ethnic Chinese and left-leaning Democratic Action Party. The other is Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, or PAS, which mostly appeals to rural Malays. Though a socially conservative Islamist organization, PAS has toned down its once radical message and now insists it has no concrete plans to transform Malaysia into an Islamic state.

All three opposition parties cooperated in the elections, usually fielding a single opposition candidate against their National Front opponent. The strategy allowed the oppo-

sition to gain a record 82 seats in Parliament and to seize four states in addition to Kelantan, which was already controlled by PAS.

The newly elected opposition legislators include an ethnic Indian rights' activist currently detained under Malaysia's draconian Internal Security Act for his role in last year's street protests by the Indian minority. Those defeated at the polls include three federal ministers, including one who heads the ethnic Indian party affiliated with UMNO.

The election's outcome reflects the growing sophistication of Malaysian society, with many voters no longer blindly choosing their representatives along purely ethnic lines, said Malaysian analyst Farish Ahmad Noor, a senior fellow at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. "We have crossed the racial divide and the era of racial politics has come to the end in Malaysia," Mr. Farish said. "It's very heartening."

The last time Malaysia's opposition came close to such a strong showing at the polls was in 1969, when it won just over one-third of Parliament seats and two state governments.

Then, ethnic Malay UMNO supporters reacted to opposition celebrations with bloody rioting that killed about 200 people, many of them ethnic Chinese, in Kuala Lumpur and other cities; the ruling

party subsequently held up that violence as a reason to clamp down on dissent and to give the Malays special rights.

Yesterday, by contrast, Malaysian cities remained calm and peaceful. Mindful of the lessons of 1969, opposition parties called on their supporters to abstain from celebrations. "No victory parades. Don't give any party the reason to declare an emergency. Stay calm. Stay cool. Stay home," popular blogger Jeff Ooi, who was elected to Parliament on the DAP ticket, urged on his Web site.

For the three opposition parties, their political future rides on whether they manage to cooperate beyond the post-election euphoria, putting aside ideological differences and improving the governance in the five states they now control. With the exception of PAS, these parties have never been in office, and few of their members have any experience in running government bureaucracies.

The stakes couldn't be higher: A successful performance in state administrations could put national power within the opposition's reach at the next elections. "If they can convince people that they can do it on a state level, operating states, people will consider whether they can run the rest of the country," said Shamsul Amri Baharudin, director of the Institute of Ethnic Studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.



Anwar Ibrahim



Abdullah Ahmad Badawi