

# When voters show who's the real boss

The Star - 12/3/2008

Malaysians have spoken out very clearly on how they feel and demonstrated political maturity in doing so.



WITH state governments tumbling and a drastically reduced parliamentary majority, the people of Malaysia have made themselves loud and clear.

As a writer, I must humbly admit that I misread the mood of the country when I stated that Malaysia's 12th general election would probably not be "an epochal contest." Indeed, the very opposite is true.

We are entering into a new political paradigm.

It will be tough and there will be many new lessons to be learnt on all sides of the political debate. But the central lesson is clear - the people are in charge.

Suffice to say people of all races - Malay, Chinese and Indian - have voted in record numbers to show their disappointment, frustration and anger at the Barisan.

A record turnout has delivered defeats to Barisan giants like Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin, Datuk M. Kayveas and Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon.

The Opposition has quadrupled its numbers in Parliament and the states of Penang and even more incredibly, Selangor, Kedah and Perak have fallen to the Opposition. For all its trumpeting of a "Blue Wave," the Barisan has also failed to recapture Kelantan again.

It now remains to be seen if the newly empowered Opposition can live up to the promise that it has shown in the lead-up to these polls. All three parties have had bad histories of squandering commanding gains through infighting and inertia.

Their success in their new states, surely barometers to their viability as political alternatives, rests on the ability of those two polar opposites, the DAP and PAS, to work together.

Meanwhile, what could have possibly caused this swing against the Barisan?

Firstly, it is obvious that the ruling coalition has underestimated the impact of young voters.

Close to a million new voters took part in this election. Their passion and conscientiousness in discharging their duties as citizens have put previous generations of voters to shame.

The Barisan has simply failed to win them over. To put it simply, the young Malaysians who voted last Saturday are a different proposition from their parents and grandparents.

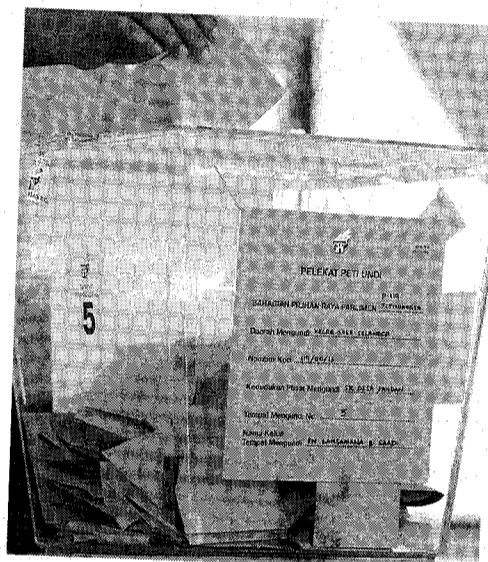
By talking down to them and treating them with gross disrespect, the Barisan is simply reaping the bitter harvest of excluding the youth from the political process through draconian laws like the UUCA.

Secondly, the Malaysian Indians have risen to become political kingmakers. Their decades-old marginalisation and more recent attacks such as temple demolitions have united them against the establishment.

They have punished their leadership in the Government, the MIC in particular, that has been ineffectual in voicing out the community's concerns.

Their Chinese counterparts, too, have registered their frustrations over the arrogance and incompetence of some sections of the Barisan. Their disgruntlement over the NEP, the creeping pace of Islamisation and their utter alienation from the national life has proven to be the downfall of Gerakan and the MCA.

Both communities have shown what the



People power: Malaysian voters showed that they were in charge last Saturday.

absence of their support can do to the Barisan.

One must also admit that many pundits have missed the discontent in the Malay seats. Umno's dominance is over. The party that delivered Merdeka has to acknowledge its diminished position, strategise and recoup.

Anger over the rising cost of living, as well as anxieties over the leadership of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi are most telling in the way many urban Malay seats were lost.

If anything at all, 2008 is a clear sign that Umno has forgotten the lessons of 1999: that it cannot assume the Malays will fall in line because it champions their supposed *ketuanan*.

Also, the Barisan seriously underestimated the continuing appeal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Despite a media blackout, he remains a potent and effective opponent. Anwar is a key factor, and will remain so for many years to come, dominating the public discourse.

What then, for the Barisan?

There will definitely be upheavals in the leadership of Gerakan, the MIC, PPP and possibly even Umno. The crux then is if the coalition can learn the lessons from this election.

And what is that lesson?

It is clear that the party strategists must go back to the drawing board. The same old ethnic scare-mongering and promises of allocations and government contracts can no longer work.

There needs to be recognition that it is no longer enough for the Government to merely focus on economics. We are facing higher expectations from all sections of the population.

Socio-political rights and a sense of fairness are becoming increasingly important to ordinary Malaysians. This goes back to the social contract and Malaysia's need to revive the spirit of mutual cooperation, trust and exchange.

Umno leaders must also ask themselves to what extent their own posturing has contributed to the weakness of the component parties?

As the dominant member of the coalition, its role in the losses cannot go absolved. Call it what you will, the Barisan and Umno must reform themselves.

The people have spoken.

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