

The polls – and the BN debacle

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THE ruling Barisan Nasional suffered its most severe electoral setback on March 8. It lost its two-thirds majority in the Federal Parliament, failed to retain control over four states, and was heavily repulsed in its bid to regain authority in Kelantan. Just World president Dr Chandra Muzaffar explores the reasons behind the Barisan's setback. He uses a question and answer format in order to clarify the issues involved.

Did ethnic issues shape the electoral outcome at all since Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society par excellence?

Ethnic concerns have been at the centre of most elections. In the 2008 election a significant segment of the Hindu Indian minority was unhappy about a series of court cases pertaining to consequences emanating from Hindu conversions to Islam, the custody of children, the religious identity of deceased persons, and so on.

The demolition of Hindu temples that sometimes stood in the way of private and/or public sector development projects had also incensed the community.

A lot of Chinese Malaysians were also deeply hurt by the keris waving incident at the Umno Youth assembly in 2006. The inflammatory speeches made by a couple of delegates at the parent body's general assembly aggravated the injury. Chinese Malaysians, like their Indian counterparts, were also disappointed

with the Government for not taking strong action against the culprits.

If many Indians and Chinese were disappointed with the Government, so were some Malays. When a largely non-Muslim group within the middle-class demanded greater protection for freedom of religion in the wake of cases involving some Muslim apostates, sections of the Muslim community reacted.

They too organised public gatherings that cautioned non-Muslims against challenging the position of Islam as the religion of the federation.

Many Malays were also angry that the Indian mass protest of Nov 25 last year led by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) had alleged that the Malay-helmed Government was practising "ethnic cleansing" of the community.

They wondered why the Government had not nipped Hindraf in the bud. After the

Hindraf protest, the Government appeared to be taking several measures to restore the confidence of the community – measures which gave the impression to the Malays that the Government was bending over backwards to please the Indian minority.

They were also piqued by all the attempts by the Government to accommodate Chinese requests on Chinese schools and the economy on the eve of the elections.

All said and done, the perception that seemed to be growing among the Malays just before the elections was that the Government had conceded too much to the non-Malays.

While unhappiness with the Government manifested itself within all communities in Peninsular Malaysia, it was perhaps strongest among the Indian Malaysians as evidenced in the ballot box.

An electoral analyst has estimated "that the Indian swing against the BN in Peninsular Malaysia was approximately 35%, the Chinese vote swing was approximately 30% and the Malay vote swing was approximately 5%."

The Opposition parties harnessed this dissatisfaction to the hilt?

One should not be surprised that they did so. In a number of instances they did a service to the nation by exposing wrongdoings which otherwise would have remained hidden in some closet somewhere.

The expose involving the late Datuk Zakaria Md Deros, a member of the Selangor state assembly who had allegedly accumulated considerable wealth and built a huge palatial mansion for himself without the requisite municipal approvals, would be an outstanding example.

At the same time however, some Opposition leaders had no compunctions about disseminating scurrilous allegations pertaining to the private lives of government figures without providing incontrovertible evidence.

Similarly, while the Opposition was right in criticising the Government for its inability to check profiteering and smuggling which had contributed to some extent to the escalating cost of living, it was wrong in hoodwinking the voters into believing that it could reduce drastically the price of petrol if it came to power.

It was disingenuous of the de-facto PKR leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim for instance to claim that it was because of his capabilities as finance minister that the petrol price was low in the nineties. The international price of oil at that time was between US\$10 and US\$27 compared with US\$100.

Truths, half truths, distortions, exaggerations and outright lies were mixed into a scintillating cocktail and served to the people by an Opposition who, like the government parties, was ever ready to separate means from ends in pursuit of state and parliamentary seats.

While it is true that the Opposition parties were disadvantaged compared to the ruling Barisan in obtaining access to the mainstream print and electronic media, they utilised to the fullest the new information and communication technologies at their disposal.

It was not just Internet and SMSes that they used to good effect, DVDs and digital cameras

were also harnessed to the maximum.

The 2008 election was perhaps the election in which the new ICTs had tremendous impact.

The effective use of the new ICTs also enabled the Opposition to communicate better with the million-odd new, young voters, compared to the Barisan.

Since the protests against the sacking of Anwar from the government in 1998-9, Opposition politicians had succeeded in opening up channels of conversation with the young through the new ICTs.

It is quite conceivable that in the recent elections, a big chunk of their votes went to the Opposition.

More specifically, what was Anwar's role in the 2008 election?

Since his dismissal as Umno deputy president and deputy prime minister in September 1998, this was the third time that Anwar was "involved" in a general election on behalf of the Opposition.

In the 1999 general election, it was the terrible injustice done to him, his incarceration and the infamous black eye that helped Opposition personalities outside prison to forge an informal coalition comprising PAS, DAP, PKR (then known as Parti Keadilan Nasional) and Parti Rakyat Malaysia. Anwar was the leader of the coalition which had a common manifesto and a common reform programme whose goal was a "Just Malaysia."

It was in the 1999 election that the vast majority of parliamentary and state battles were one to one contests between Barisan and the Opposition front.

The situation changed somewhat in the 2004 general election. Only PKR and PAS were left in the BA, the DAP having pulled out in September 2001.

Anwar, still in prison continued to be the leader but the Opposition front's performance was dismal. It won only seven parliamentary seats – one PKR and six PAS – compared with a total of 45 seats in the 1999 election.

The Opposition front and Anwar could not withstand the powerful Abdullah hurricane that swept the land in 2004.

What was it in Anwar's role in 2008 which helped change the electoral landscape so dramatically?

Unlike 1999 and 2004, he was now out of prison. It was his campaigning, his ability to mobilise, his networking, and most of all, his oratory that made the difference. This is why even though there was no common manifesto among the Opposition parties in 2008, and there were, on a percentage basis, more straight fights between the BN and the Opposition, compared with 1999, Anwar's physical presence and performance buoyed the Opposition's fortunes.

Though I remain a critic of Anwar and his politics, it must be acknowledged that there has never been an instance in Malaysian politics when a single individual has made such a significant difference to the electoral landscape of the nation.

Anwar appealed to a segment of the Malay electorate because of his earlier incarceration and the ordeal he had gone through. At the

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> FROM PAGE 18

same time, his association with PAS refurbished his credentials with the Malay community since dissent in Malay society has always derived legitimacy from Islam. However, it was his ability to attract non-Malay voters at all levels, especially in the middle and upper echelons, that made his 2008 foray unique.

Anwar succeeded in presenting himself as a man who would fight for non-Malay equality, as someone who will champion Chinese and Indian rights, whatever the costs and consequences.

In more concrete terms, he promised Chinese and Indians that he would eliminate the New Economic Policy – a policy which incidentally had formally come to an end in 1990 but a policy which to non-Malays embodied all the ethnic discrimination and ethnic privileging that they resented so much.

He also struck a chord with Chinese Malaysians by admonishing the Umno leadership for failing to take a position against the *keris* incident.

To a lot of Hindu-Indian Malaysians, he appeared as the saviour of their temples and their dignity. Anwar, in other words, pressed all the right ethnic buttons with the non-Malay communities in the 2008 elections.

In this regard, there is some evidence to suggest that whenever a prominent Malay leader articulates non-Malay grievances, the Chinese and Indian anti-establishment vote shoots up significantly.

It is as if they are encouraged, even emboldened, by the stance of the Malay leader.

Thus, in 1969, the newly formed, mainly Chinese Gerakan with a credible Malay, Prof Syed Hussein Alatas, as its president, trounced the MCA and MIC, the Chinese and Indian components of the ruling Alliance (the predecessor of the BN) in the Penang state election, winning two-thirds of the assembly seats.

In 1990, when the DAP teamed up with the Malay-based Semangat 46 led by a former finance minister, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, which also had as its patron Malaysia's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Chinese opposition party was able to wipe out both the MCA and the MIC in the Penang state polls.

The other Chinese majority party in Penang, the Gerakan, however managed to retain a few seats.

In a sense, Anwar and the Malay-based but multi-ethnic PKR emboldened the non-Malay voter as few other Malay opposition groups had done in the past.

Non-Malays felt confident that they could go for the jugular because a Malay leader of stature was prepared to espouse their cause.

The Chinese in particular were brave enough now to abandon their often cautious and pragmatic approach to political change.

You have looked at Anwar's role. What was former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's role in the Barisan debacle?

It will be recalled that a few days before the general election, Dr Mahathir reminded voters of the importance of ensuring that there was a strong Opposition.

He had also criticised Abdullah's leadership. Analysts point out that his attacks on Abdullah in 2006 and part of 2007 had undoubtedly undermined the latter's standing in Malaysian society and may have contributed to the Barisan's decline at the 2008 polls.

Did the mainstream media also contribute towards the Barisan debacle?

From Nomination Day to polling day, the local mainstream print and electronic media almost all of which are linked in one way or another to the ruling coalition, campaigned vigorously for the Barisan.

Their campaign was so propagandistic that it turned off a lot of people. There was little balance in their coverage of election issues or activities.

Given the increasingly critical attitude of the voting population, it is quite conceivable that Barisan media propaganda may have undermined the Barisan itself.

If the mainstream print and electronic media were unabashedly pro-Barisan, several non-governmental organisation magazines were shamelessly pro-Opposition.

They were unwilling to evaluate their favourite Opposition leaders on the basis of those standards and principles that they insist Barisan officials adhere to.

Much of cyber media was also loaded against the Barisan just as major Western media outlets were obviously biased towards the Opposition, specifically Anwar and his party.

It has been said that by allowing for more debate and discussion on a number of major national issues, Abdullah undermined his own position.

There may be some truth in that. In contrast to the Dr Mahathir years, there has been under Abdullah much more discussion on a variety of issues ranging from the environment to ethnic relations. Topics such as corruption have been debated live over RTM.

Whenever a government provides some latitude for free expression after decades of authoritarian rule, the ensuing debate often tends to weaken the position of the ruling elite who had in the first instance broadened the scope for dissent.

This has happened in a number of countries. Though every case is unique, the Malaysian situation bears some semblance to the Aquino administration in the post-Marcos period or the Habibie government in the post-Suharto period.

To put it in another way, Abdullah perhaps has had to pay the price for adopting a more accommodative approach to dissent.