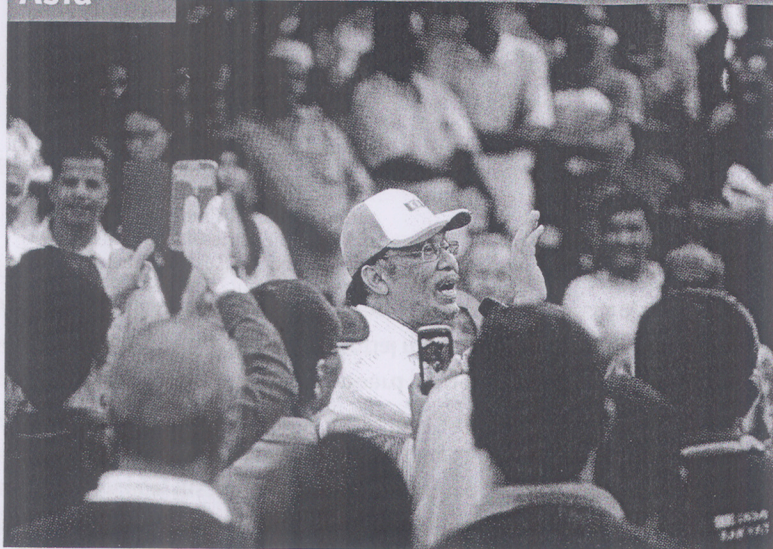


Newspaper	The Economist
Date	4/5/2013

Asia

The Economist May 4th 2013 23



Also in this section

- 24 Singapore's changing economy
- 24 Flood control in Vietnam
- 25 Bangladesh's tragedy

For daily analysis and debate on Asia, visit
Economist.com/asia
Economist.com/blogs/banyan

Elections in Malaysia

“Ubah” you can believe in?

The Economist - 4/5/2013

PENANG

The Malaysian opposition is optimistic ahead of elections. But the prime minister is a shrewd and well-funded campaigner

“NO TO racism, no to corruption,” bellows Anwar Ibrahim from a stage in front of 50,000 delirious supporters, braving heavy rain to acclaim their idol in Penang. It is the last week of campaigning before Malaysia's general election on May 5th and the leader of the opposition has been criss-crossing the country to shore up his support and make inroads into government territory. The task before Mr Anwar (pictured) is one of the most daunting in the annals of modern democracy: to unseat the world's longest continually elected governing coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN). It has ruled Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957.

He will never have a better chance than now. In the latest poll, in 2008, Mr Anwar's Pakatan Rakyat coalition won five out of 12 state contests and for the first time robbed BN of its two-thirds majority in parliament. This time it could be closer. Mr Anwar's rallying-cry of “ubah”, meaning “change”, has captured a widespread feeling among younger, mostly urban and increasingly affluent voters that their country requires fundamental restructuring to break out of the “middle-income trap”, to move away from the race-based politics of BN, and to become a modern democracy. No fewer than 2.6m new voters have registered (out of a total of 13.3m). Their tweets and texts will have a vital say in the outcome of the election.

Mr Anwar's problem, though, is that

the prime minister, Najib Razak, is wooing exactly the same voters by campaigning for much the same vision—a “transformation” he calls it—and he is doing it even more effectively. Over the past two years Mr Najib has repealed many oppressive colonial-era laws, for instance, and encouraged private-sector business with his Economic Transformation Programme. His argument is that if voters want more change then they should stick with the incumbent. He is embellishing this message with rallies featuring pop and television stars, aimed at his target audience.

But BN is trying to have it both ways. To balance this appeal to the young, it is simultaneously running an almost separate campaign to bolster its older ethnic Malay base. The dominant party of the BN coalition is the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), founded to uphold the rights of the majority Malays (about 67% of the population) over the minorities of Chinese (25%) and ethnic Indians (7%). UMNO forced through the affirmative-action policies for Malays in the early 1970s. These have since been watered down, but are still widely resented, even by some Malays. Indeed, Mr Anwar's main target in this campaign is the corruption and racism produced by these policies.

Mr Najib is the leader of UMNO but has been wooing younger, more liberal voters by further dismantling the system of Malay privileges. Out in the countryside,

however, UMNO is conducting a very different campaign to scare voters away from the Pakatan and reassure the party's base—older rural Malays known as *bumiputra* (“sons of the soil”)—that UMNO will continue to champion Malay rights. Mahathir Mohamad, an 87-year-old former prime minister and stalwart supporter of Malay privileges, has been stoking up the Malay heartlands, interrupting his campaign only to attend the funeral in London of Margaret Thatcher.

In particular he has been campaigning alongside leaders of the extremist Perkasa organisation. Founded in 2009, it claims a membership of 300,000 and is against any erosion of Malay privileges. It has often been accused of racism and has been officially disowned by UMNO, yet experts reckon that about 80% of its members also belong to the party. Mr Mahathir's cultivation of Perkasa should increase Malay support for UMNO, which could be crucial. Yet his strategy also gives the organisation plausible deniability.

The overall effect is that it will be as hard as ever for Pakatan to win extra votes in the rural areas it needs to win power. Having won 82 seats in 2008, Pakatan must pick up at least ten more in each of the states of Sabah, Sarawak and Johor, all BN strongholds, to stand any chance of getting a majority in the 222-seat parliament. It is a tall order.

There are also real questions about the integrity of the poll itself. In the crucial battleground state of Selangor, for instance, the Pakatan state government dissected the register and found that 27% of newly registered voters (more than 134,000 of them) could not be identified—raising suspicions that they are “phantom voters”.

For the veteran Mr Anwar the election is a final fling. He has promised he will retire if he loses. ■