

Newspaper	The Edge
Date	13/5/2013

Malaysia at a political cliff

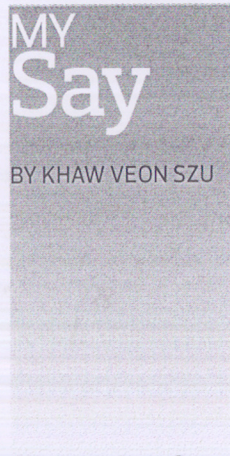
The Edge - 13/5/2013

Last Sunday must have been the longest and most anxious night for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak as well as opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. The competition for seats in the 13th general election was so fierce and so close that it could have gone either way. Anwar actually claimed early electoral victory via twitter within hours of vote-counting.

But as the counting went on late into the night, it became apparent that Pakatan Rakyat (PR) would not be able to unseat Najib's Barisan Nasional, one of the world's longest-ruling coalitions.

At the end, BN, which has governed Malaysia since independence in 1957, won 133 of the 222 seats in Parliament, fending off the strongest challenge it has ever faced. News of the victory and comfortable working majority secured by BN prompted Bursa Malaysia's FBM KLCI to surge nearly 8% in early trade on Monday, and the country's currency, the ringgit, to hit a 10-month high.

The stock market index as well as the ringgit had been depressed over concerns that the BN was in greater danger of losing power than at any time in 56 years before polling day on May 5. But any premature optimism that market stability would be restored soon could be short-lived because of the



political uncertainty that has resulted following the highly polarised election results

While support for the ruling coalition from the majority ethnic Malays/ bumiputeras, especially in the rural areas, remained solid, ethnic Chinese, who make up a quarter of the population, continued to desert BN, accelerating a trend that started in the last general election

Yet, despite the mass desertion of Chinese voters from BN nationwide, from Peninsular Malaysia to Sabah and Sarawak, it would be too simplistic to describe this voting trend as a "Chinese tsunami" that contributed to PR's significant gains in Parliament and many legislative assemblies, including Johor and Pahang — both traditional fortresses of BN.

In fact, the two-thirds majority secured by PR in the Selangor State Assembly in the hard-fought battle for control of the country's richest state would not have been possible without the support of voters that cut across racial and religious divides.

As this writer pointed out in "Seeking the Political Perfect Storm" last month, both BN and PR are seeking political storms, so to speak, to achieve their respective political agendas - one to wrest federal power and the other to defend and enhance its power. But, both sides apparently overlooked

the fact that in doing so, they might just end up on a political cliff, bringing the country closer to political and economic uncertainty.

This is precisely the precarious state that this nation is in now. On the one hand, we have Anwar and PR rejecting the results as the country's "Election Commission (EC) had failed to investigate evidence of widespread vote fraud". Not only that, he vowed to hold mass rallies throughout the country, starting at the Kelana Jaya Stadium in Selangor last Wednesday, to amass support from Malaysians indignant at the just concluded polls results and move for a "national consensus" to question the legitimacy of the newly-elected BN government.

On the other hand, Najib's BN government is struggling to form a truly 1Malaysia cabinet that encompasses representatives of all communities, especially the Chinese. That's because most of the Chinese leaders in BN's component parties were resoundingly defeated.

Moreover, the leadership of MCA and Gerakan have made known their stand not to accept any cabinet post in view of their dismal performance.

Worse still, the Umno-owned newspapers - notably Utusan Malaysia, which is known for its far-right political views, have since published a number



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National interest comes first

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of stories blaming the Chinese for the poor-showing of BN. Utusan even front-paged the provocative question, "What else do Chinese want (Apa lagi Cina mahu)?" a few days ago in what appeared to be an attempt to make the Chinese community the scapegoat in the poorest ever showing by Umno-led BN.

This provocative message with heavy racial overtones clearly runs counter to the national reconciliation message offered by Najib at his first press conference after BN confirmed winning a mandate to form the new federal government last Sunday.

Many political observers fear that these contradictory messages from his own party lend weight to talk that Najib will have his hands full in dealing with the hawks in Umno, particularly at a time when the party elections are just around the corner.

Obviously, the BN and PR, in seeking the political perfect storm to achieve their respective agen-

das, have actually landed the nation on a dangerous political cliff. To avoid the whole nation going over, politicians from both sides of the political divide had better pay heed to the following speech made by the late Tun Lim Chong Eu back in 1974.

After the BN was launched by Tun Abdul Razak on Jan 17, 1974, Lim, in his speech at Gerakan's national delegates conference held in Dewan Sri Pinang in Penang on March 9 that year, solemnly declared: "Today in Malaysia, there is no place for polarisation in political partisanship or racial sectarian interests because the national interest must come first in order to consolidate our efforts and our activities to achieve a common destiny for our multiracial nation." E

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