

**In Election 2013 results, beginning of the end for race politics**  
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 21 — Election 2013 demonstrated that Malaysia's system of race-based politics is crumbling under the impact of urbanisation and the reality of Malay-majority rule, an opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal suggested today.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak is also considered more popular than Umno, and should help usher in "unstoppable" change and the move away from race politics, Hong Kong journalist Philip Bowring wrote in the commentary for the highly-influential financial newspaper.

But the writer noted the larger-than-life presence of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (picture), the country's longest-serving former prime minister who has continued to stay in the forefront of Umno politics despite his 2003 retirement, and is even leading the chorus of criticisms against Najib.

"The race card remains powerful in the hand of Mr Mahathir, the architect of economic modernisation who has long been obsessed with the sort of racial theories laid out in his once-banned 1960s book 'The Malay Dilemma'," Bowring wrote.

He said criticisms against Najib today centre largely on the prime minister's alleged making of "too many concessions" to the Chinese but earning no votes in return. In Election 2013, a majority of the country's second-largest ethnic group had voted against the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN).

During his victory speech in the early hours of May 6, Najib had publicly admitted to losing the support of the Chinese, and even appeared to blame BN's colossal losses on what he termed as a "Chinese tsunami".

The country's sixth prime minister earned condemnation for using race to characterise the vote trend of the polls, which analysts said had not reflected a "Chinese tsunami" but a rural-urban divide.

In its reading of the polls outcome, independent research house Merdeka Center said the results showed a major swing among the multiracial urban and middle-class electorate away from BN, taking with it not just the Chinese votes but a large segment of the Malay votes as well.

Ibrahim Suffian, the centre's director, in dissecting the results, explained that voters were obviously split between different classes, with the working and lower-income classes mostly voting for BN, and the middle and upper classes for Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

And although not yet a spent force within Umno, an analysis of where and how he campaigned also appeared to lay bare Dr Mahathir's waning influence as an icon in modern-day politics.

The former prime minister had played the race card incessantly during the 15-day campaign but BN candidates whom he backed or shared his ideals — such as the controversial Datuk Zulkifli Noordin and Datuk Ibrahim Ali — had all lost their bids.

In Kedah — where his son Datuk Mukhriz is now menteri besar on the back of a BN victory — local politicians and observers have pointed out that voters gave PAS the boot because of poor governance by the PR party.

Brand Mahathir did not win Kedah for BN, but it was rather a case of PAS losing the state, one senior Umno politician in Kedah told The Malaysian Insider.

Dr Mahathir's attempt at painting the battle for Gelang Patah in Johor as a Malay-versus-Chinese battle, and his repeated accusations against the DAP's Lim Kit Siang as an "extremist racist" had also failed miserably.

In his commentary, Bowring noted that Malay-centric policies reminiscent of the Mahathir years still appeal to PR's Malay-dominated parties of PAS and PKR. The latter party is Malaysia's largest multiracial party and is led by Dr Mahathir's long-time arch nemesis Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The writer said that it is the still-existent extreme wing of Umno that believes it can draw back some support away from these parties by appealing to the Malay racial sentiment, instead of focusing on the Chinese or urban Malays, who are now more concerned with economic than ethnic issues.

"There is a clear danger of prolonged attempts to whip up racial tensions," Bowring wrote.

But he said this apparent disarray in Umno is an uncomfortable but necessary prelude to realignments reflecting the Malaysia of today, where racial barriers are slowly coming down to show, instead, the clear disconnect between the urbanites and the rural folk.

"This is good news for racial harmony and bad news for the parties in the ruling coalition," he said.

"These will require the non-Malays, too, to place less emphasis on their language and educational rights in return for the phasing out of Malay preferences in the economy and civil service. All parties will need to adjust," he added.

But Bowring insisted that the middle ground of Malaysian politics can still win but it will not be the old BN of conservative race-based parties that will survive these "unstoppable changes".

"Malaysia is moving toward necessary political and policy transformations that will likely be peaceful and evolutionary, as befits a mostly prosperous and optimistic society — and one that is more tolerant than some Umno politicians would like to believe," he wrote.

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