

Analysis: Malaysia - It was Never About the Election

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It was always about what would happen afterwards

It is extremely difficult to find any real winners in the results which dripped out from Malaysia's Electoral Commission late Sunday night and early Monday morning - although, somewhat surprisingly, one could be Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, who ran ahead of his party and who managed to preserve majorities in Negeri Sembilan, Terengganu and Pahang against an opposition onslaught, and to win back Kedah through the clever tactic of sending Mukhriz Mahathir, the son of the long-serving Prime Minister into the fray as a candidate for the chief ministership.

The United Malays National Organization, the biggest ethnic* party in the Barisan, needs reform and there is no one in sight who can drive it. Failing to reform will lead UMNO to inevitable extinction within two general elections. The biggest problem is that the party may not want to reform itself. It is evident that Najib over the last few years hasn't been able to firmly steer UMNO into the directions he wanted to go, and his agenda has been hijacked by the likes of the Malay nationalist NGO Perkasa, doing great damage. For these reasons perhaps he should not take total blame.

In this light, Najib could be saved from a sudden political death, as there is really nobody within close range to the current leadership who has the necessary charisma, innovation and goodwill to make the necessary reforms. Going against all pundits, Najib may survive. Toppling him now for his deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin, could lead to very costly rifts in UMNO, which the party may not be able to afford. Any change in the current leadership would most probably signal that UMNO will steer to the conservative right, counterintuitive to what the electorate might be saying. It was UMNO moderates such as Khairy Jamaluddin and Shahrir Samad who profited in the election.

Federally, the opposition gained a net seven seats, with the new Parliament comprising 133 Barisan Nasional to 89 Pakatan Rakyat seats. However at the same time Pakatan lost ground, losing federal seats in the northern state of Kedah, as well as the state government.

Notably Parti Islam se-Malaysia Vice President Mohamad Sabu, considered to be a modernizer for PAS, lost the Pendatang parliamentary seat in Kedah. Pakatan Rakyat also failed to make any gains in neighboring Perlis, even though it believed it had a chance of doing so. The opposition coalition narrowly failed to regain the Perak state government which it lost through defections in 2009, with the Barisan winning 31 to Pakatan 28 seats. In addition the opposition just failed to win the state government in Terengganu where many commentators believed that Pakatan would have to win if it had any chance of winning the Federal government. Pakatan Rakyat also failed to wrest Negeri Sembilan from the BN, with PAS losing all of the 10 seats it contested.

The Barisan had a number of casualties. DAP veteran Lim Kit Siang trounced Johor Chief

Minister Abdul Ghani Othman in Johor, and the Melaka Chief Minister Mohd Ali Rustam, trying to move to the federal parliament was defeated. Federal Territories Minister Raja Nong Chik Zainal Abidin failed in his bid to win the urban seat of Lembah Pantai in Kuala Lumpur from the PKR incumbent Nurul Izzah Anwar. A cabinet minister in Sabah Bernard Dompok, and VK Liew in Sandakan both lost. Yong Koon Seng in Sarawak also lost his seat of Stampin. This has given Pakatan Rakyat a new front in East Malaysia where they now hold three parliamentary seats and 11 state seats in Sabah, and picked up six parliamentary seats in Sarawak.

The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) went from 15 seats to 6 federally, and to only 10 state seats, although they contested 37 parliamentary and 90 state seats. Gerakan now only has one seat in the parliament. The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) won only four out of the nine seats it contested. The Barisan is effectively a bumiputera government with little Chinese or Indian representation.

The two ultra Malay Perkasa candidates, Ibrahim Ali in Pasir Mas Kelantan and Zulkifli Noordin in Shah Alam, Selangor both lost to Pakatan Rakyat candidates, indicating that the electorate is not in favor of extreme politics.

The Democratic Action Party (DAP) is probably the exception. It has made massive gains both state and federally, making great inroads and winning many seats in the urban areas of Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Seremban, Melaka and in Johor. It has consolidated its position in holding Penang, and is now the biggest party in the opposition with 38 seats. This is in contrast to both PAS and PKR, which both lost federal seats.

From the Pakatan perspective, winning government from the 2008 base was probably too ambitious. Rarely can any opposition in a Westminster system make such gains in one election, and it is easy to forget the dissatisfactions back in 2008 with the Barisan that led to that result. Therefore making further electoral gains was not going to be easy, except perhaps in areas like Johor, Sabah, and Sarawak, which hadn't been focused upon before.

From this reasoning perhaps Pakatan lost the election back in 2008 by not choosing to consolidate what it had won, and to pursue gaining government so vigorously. Where Pakatan ran effective and efficient governments they gained, in Kedah, where internal problems were perceived, the state was lost, just as Pakatan lost Terengganu back in 1999.

In retrospect Pakatan's strategy of running a continuous election campaign since 2008 may not have been the wisest. Pakatan's dealing with all the corruption issues arising during the last five years within the Barisan government did little to win over the voters they needed. The issues of good governance and corruption appeal to the middle class urban constituency, but the rural constituency has little interest in those issues.

And this is a problem for the Barisan. This traditional constituency, which has voted according to their prosperity and sense of stability, is shrinking. The demographics of Malaysia are rapidly changing where the rural/urban ratio has turned 180 degrees from being 70/30 to 30/70 over the last three election periods although because of malapportionment rural votes are effectively double the value of urban ones.

Therefore for Pakatan to rule, it must win the hearts and minds of the rural constituency, and

for the Barisan it must determine how it can win the hearts and minds of the urban constituency.

This is the basic dilemma facing both fronts, providing different and specific challenges to each.

The Barisan has to make a deeply considered decision about whether it will continue posing its extreme ethnic rhetoric or go back to its traditional philosophy of ethnic consensus, which the electorate appears to want, judging by early analysis of the results. However, much of UMNO is still dominated by an old guard who understand this way of politics. UMNO now has a vacuum in young talent, which in the opposition Pakatan is plentiful. Any change in leadership is not likely to change UMNO's philosophy as it's embedded within the structure of the party.

The Barisan also faces another challenge in that it has become distinctly three segments. Sabah and Sarawak now have an enormous amount of independence and are facing their own problems. In addition to the cities, the traditional support base for Barisan Sarawak under Chief Minister Taib Mahmud is slowly eroding in the Iban heartlands. The clock is ticking. The divide and conquer politics of Sabah are not easy to control and can easily turn.

However one thing both Sabah and Sarawak aspire to is more autonomy in decision-making from Putrajaya. And with the changing political landscape of the peninsula, with three states in the hands of the non-Barisan, there will be great pressure to redefine how federal-state relationships operate in Malaysia. If economic growth and development is to continue unhindered, some form of new cooperative formula is needed. Federalism in Malaysia could be the big winner of this election.

The loss of Kedah by Pakatan, just like the loss of Terengganu some years ago, indicates this side of politics hasn't got their act together yet. Rural Malaysia wants accountability when a party is elected to government. They have stricter standards for new incumbents than they had for the Barisan, and high expectations. With Mukhriz about to become chief minister, this is a lesson to Pakatan about the formidability of UMNO in the rural areas and the need to get the right message to the people.

Consequently one must question the likes of Harun Din, deputy spiritual leader of PAS bringing up issues of hudud (religious) laws during an election campaign and Amin Hadi's comments about PSM, suggesting disagreement among the parties comprising Pakatan.

This indicates that the electorate in rural Malaysia wants both harmony and moderation, and the concepts of 1Malaysia and Islam Hadhari are ironically appealing. If this is the case, then Pakatan Rakyat still has a lot of work to do in defining what they as a front really stand for.

Pakatan's strategy to take Putrajaya didn't work. Although in many areas they gained ground, they also lost it. This will require an enormous amount of thinking and strategizing for the next general election in five years time.

This leads to the structure of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, Anwar's party, itself. As a one-cause movement to free Anwar back in the late 1990s, it has grown into a multiracial party with a

young and ambitious membership. Many feel that it's now the time that PKR shed itself of the possibility of becoming a dynasty, and that the value of the 65-year-old Anwar Ibrahim's direct stewardship should come to an end. This is the Achilles heel and will determine whether it grows into a formidable party that may one day share federal government or just fade away like others before it. PKR has over the last five years had great difficulty in covering up the friction and power struggles going on within it. Maybe within the party it is time to get the next generation prepared to be the vanguard for the next election.

This next five years may see the passing of the guard to a younger generation. It is likely that this may well be the last term for many household names in Malaysian politics. PAS in Kelantan has to work on succession from Nik Aziz Nik Mat, long time Chief Minister of the state. The DAP may have to progress past its evergreen heroes Lim Kit Siang, and Karpal Singh. The DAP has many bright young up and coming stars. All the components of the Barisan if they are to survive need to look towards their youth. If this transition is not made, then PKR with the DAP will be the parties that have the potential to fill the electoral vacuum.

Malaysia can't afford another five-year campaign. The people have spoken and it's time for the parties to reflect and change according to the new electoral realities that now exist. Most independents were passed over electorally, which indicates that it's strong parties the voters want. People want to know about the future of their country.

Yes there is electoral gerrymandering, dubious people on electoral roles, foreigners voting in the election, and other dirty tricks going on, but crying about the system will not change the result, however unjust many think the result was. No electoral system is perfect and Malaysia's still has a long way to go. The role of the opposition is to keep the pressure on the government. This they have been successful in, abate in a slow manner. But the electoral system is only one of the issues, it's the parties themselves that have to ensure they are close to the pulse of the electorate they seek to serve. The 13th General Election was a lesson to all.

**typo corrected 7 May 2013 (Murray Hunter is an Australian academic teaching in a Malaysian university)*

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