

## ***Malaysia: An Irreconcilable Divide?***

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### ***The outlook isn't that good, an academic says***

Never before have Malaysians ventured into such uncharted waters. The outcome of the May 5 general elections has revealed just how split and intensely divided the electorate in the country currently is, and it has set in motion a political and social scenario that is tantamount to having to confront new realities in this nation of some 27 million people.

The fact that the two main political coalitions Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) - spearheaded by Najib Abdul Razak for the former and Anwar Ibrahim for the latter - were tangled in an intense campaign leading up to the elections was emblematic of the fact that Malaysians found themselves divided between two distinctly divergent paths. Recognizing the lack of widespread enthusiasm for the several BN aligned parties, campaign strategists for BN made a distinct choice during the campaign to play up Najib's relatively favorable public rating as a way to galvanize support. By contrast, Anwar's popularity and his dynamic public presence set the stage for the campaign to be one about a popularity contest between Najib and Anwar.

Yet, it was apparent from early on in the buildup to the elections, and since then, that the Malaysian divide is much more than one about two prominent political figures, it is indeed substantive and deep. The fact that Najib had to stem the political bleeding for the ruling coalition that first became most transparent after the 2008 general elections seemed obvious enough. The loss of their two-thirds control of parliament and several key states including Selangor, Penang and Kedah in 2008 was a significant enough blow to BN's seemingly invincible political machinery. Indeed, one of the main goals of BN this time around was not just to reassert their domination in parliament, but also to recapture the aforementioned state governments from the PR coalitions.

Although BN managed to wrest Kedah from PR's control, the much coveted states of Selangor and Penang once again remained out of the former's grasp. Indeed, as is well-known by now, aside from suffering greater losses in these two significant states, Najib's coalition ceded more ground to the opposition since 2008 as its majority in parliament dropped from 140 to 133 seats while it also lost the popular vote (52 to 48 percent). Yet, having garnered enough seats in a [gerrymandered](#), first-past-the post electoral system, BN has managed to continue its historic streak of uninterrupted control of the federal government.

Most of the postmortems of this highly contentious and charged election have revealed some consistent findings. Of all the kernels of facts about the elections, we know that along with rural voters, a higher proportion of females also leaned heavily towards BN. On the other hand, the younger voters (particularly in those in their 20s and early 30s), for a significant number of whom this would have been their first foray into the electoral rolls, and non-rural voters were more enthusiastic and energized about the

opposition.

The significance of this mobilization of younger and more agitated voters is being played out in so-called 'Black 505' rallies in various parts of the country in the days since the elections. Notwithstanding the fact that these rallies are far from spontaneous and have come to represent PR's way of keeping the spotlight on their claims that BN's parliamentary wins are attributable to gross electoral fraud, the response of PR's supporters in coming out to these rallies is a telling barometer of the depth and intensity of the political divide.

Thus far, relatively large rallies - in the tens of thousands - not only in PR strongholds such as in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, but also in BN controlled states such as Johor and Negeri Sembilan - suggest that the opposition remains focused and agitated about making sure the issue of electoral fraud does not become a mere footnote.

While these rallies seem unlikely to result in any kind of process that might lead to a reconsideration of the validity of the results in various constituencies as singled out by PR for suspicious voting patterns and tainted ballots, let alone a reversal of the overall outcome as it currently stands, the rallies continue to symbolically undermine the BN government's legitimacy. Just as critically, they reinforce the fact that the line demarcating the political divide between the two sides of the political divide has never been more tangible and profound.

This divide, one that has become progressively crystallized over the past decade, is likely to only get more intense. On one level, a much emboldened and empowered opposition means there is going to be even closer scrutiny of Najib's policies. While the PR-sponsored rallies have thus far been a potent means by which Anwar has kept the heat on Najib and the Barisan, they obviously cannot go on indefinitely. When Anwar and his allies eventually go back to the mundane grind of the more routine political tussles, that will be when we will learn how effective the opposition can be in further extending the credibility gap problem for Najib's government.

Such a charged political climate will also most certainly ensure that Najib's allies from the far-right of his UMNO party will not take too kindly to this scrutiny and political assault from the opposition.

Indeed, some of the more overt political confrontations and forays between the pro-Najib Malay ultra-nationalists such as Perkasa and the opposition since 2008 are likely to serve as precursors to what lies ahead as far as political theater is concerned.

If Najib's past record is any indication, we're unlikely to see him rein in the ultra-nationalist who have been a loyal and dependable base for his party. Yet, it is arguable that Najib would be well-served to systematically move further to the center-left of his party and, by extension, regain some of the soft public support that abandoned his coalition this time around, since the far-right wing really has no alternative but to stick with Najib's UMNO party.

However, don't expect Najib to make any bold and consistent moves toward the center-left until after the next round of UMNO's general assembly, where he will first no doubt

need to secure his own standing and credibility within the party. That said, there is nonetheless a compelling case to be made for him to seize the moment, so to speak, and address a number of the fundamental grievances of a large cross-section of the electorate that led them to abandon his coalition.

These issues are quite widely known: addressing the rampant racism and politicization of race, confronting and clamping down on the pervasiveness of corruption not least among those in high place in the government and making a concerted effort to stall and reverse the precipitous decline of public confidence in public institutions, such as law enforcement and the judiciary.

The fact of the matter is the lack of public confidence in the government's willingness and ability to deliver on 'good governance' by instituting bold reforms has reached an ominously critical point and much of this public disappointment has translated into public cynicism, which PR has effectively exploited since 2008. However, if history is any indication, the odds are heavily stacked against UMNO or Najib pursuing fundamental reforms in the aforementioned areas.

As such, the stage seems set for what is likely to be a volatile and deeply divisive political theater for the foreseeable future.

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