

Malaysia's Barisan Ekes Out Diminished Win
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Racial lines harden as corrupt electoral rules trump desire for change

Malaysia's ruling Barisan Nasional won a bitter and disputed election Sunday, taking 133 seats in the 222-member national parliament to 89 for the opposition Pakatan Rakyat while at the same time the three-party opposition appears to have narrowly won the popular vote by a 50-49 margin.

As expected, gerrymandering and misallocation of seats provided the Barisan with its margin of victory in the parliament -- what William Case, a professor in the Department of Asian and International Studies and former director of the Southeast Asia Research Center at City University of Hong Kong, called "grievous forms of gerrymandering and malapportionment, a partisan use of civil servants and state resources, extensive vote-buying, off-the-cuff development grants, a badly distorted electoral roll, a pliable election commission, a misrepresentative first-past-the-post system, an absurdly abused media, and a worrying usage of goons."

Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim held a press conference following the vote, which recorded a historic turnout of more than 80 percent, to say "irregularities" had cost his Pakatan coalition numerous seats which it lost by narrow margins. There was considerable change as Anwar's coalition dominated urban areas, with Pakatan Rakyat picking up 21 seats from the Barisan but losing 15, an indication of the dramatic swing among Chinese voters away from the Barisan.

Anwar said he would refuse to accept the verdict unless the Election Commission deals with widespread complaints of voter fraud, which is highly unlikely since the election commission is a unit of the prime minister's office.

The Barisan took back the northern state of Kedah from the opposition on the strength of the candidacy for chief minister of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's son Mukhriz, and managed to defend itself in Perak, which the opposition won in 2008 but lost when three opposition party members switched to independent after the vote. That leaves Pakatan with three of the country's most populous and richest urban states, by a two-thirds margin in each. The coalition also made inroads in the UMNO stronghold of Johor, where venerable Democratic Action Party leader Lim Kit Siang won a seat.

The Barisan followed a strategy that exacerbated what was already a growing divide between majority ethnic Malays, who make up 60.1 percent of the population, and the wealthier, urban Chinese, who make up about 25 percent. In a word, the racial divide is now a chasm, with the country seemingly having abandoned the historic racial mix of ethnic Malay, Indian and Chinese parties that had ruled the country since independence for 56 years. And with the Chinese dominating private investment, outside government-linked companies, that raises questions where the private economy goes from here.

The question is now whether Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak can retain his seat at the top of the party and the government. Mahathir, who remains a kingmaker at age 87, told reporters earlier that Najib had to improve on the 140 seats the Barisan Nasional won in 2008. His protege, deputy premier Muhyiddin Yassin, has been widely rumored to be after Najib's job. It was Mahathir who in 2009 engineered the departure of Najib's predecessor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, after the coalition's poor showing in 2008.

If Muhyiddin takes over, there are questions whether Najib's 1Malaysia Economic Transformation Program, which included doing away with some of the affirmative action programs that give privilege to ethnic Malays, will survive.

The election was dogged by charges of ghost voting, vote-buying and outright intimidation. Police recorded more than 2,000 incidents of various kinds of violence. In the waning moments of the campaign, Najib issued US\$2.6 billion worth of handouts to his ethnic Malay base.

The two Barisan Chinese parties have almost totally collapsed, with the Malaysian Chinese Association seats in the national coalition falling from 15 to six. In an indication of just how badly the drubbing was, the MCA was contesting 37 national seats and 90 seats in state assemblies but won only 10. Gerakan fell to one seat from two. By contrast, the Democratic Action Party, the ethnic Chinese component of the Pakatan Rakyat coalition, won 38 seats, up 10 from 2008.

The Malaysian Indian Congress fared somewhat better, taking four of the nine seats it contested.

The hoped-for surge of middle-class Malays for Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat didn't happen, with the party taking 30, down one from the previous election. Parti Islam se-Malaysia's strategy to moderate its religious views also seems not to have much of an impact. PAS's total fell by two seats, to 21. In the state of Negeri Sembilan, where PAS was expecting to improve, it lost all 10 of the seats it contested.

The seven seats the opposition coalition picked up were all in the East Malaysia states of Sabah and Sarawak.

"We will work towards more moderate and accommodative policies for the country," a clearly chastened Najib told reporters early this morning. "We have tried our best but other factors have happened. We didn't get much support from the Chinese for our development plans."

The prime minister said the election had been hit by a "Chinese tsunami" and added that he was "afraid that if this is allowed to continue, it will create tensions." He called for a "national reconciliation process", where he said that "extremist ideologies" will be put aside. "Racial harmony is imperative for us," he said, before saying that the country must reject "racial politics and extremism", without making reference to any particular party.

Najib said he wasn't concerned about violent street demonstrations if the opposition and election reform groups' refuse to validate the government's diminished number of seats in parliament and its apparent loss of the popular vote.

"I think we can manage it and the most important thing is that we have to show the world we are a mature democracy," Najib said.

One comforting development is that two of Mahathir's other proteges, Ibrahim Ali and Zulkifli Noordin, the president and vice president of the Malay superiority NGO Perkasa, respectively, both failed to gain seats in the parliament. Zulkifli was named to a candidacy by Najib and Ibrahim Ali ran as an independent but the UMNO candidate was persuaded to withdraw in his behalf. Ibrahim in particular had made a long series of blistering statements supporting ketuanan Melayu, or Malay superiority, with Perkasa acting as UMNO's attack dog in the effort to bring out ethnic Malay voters.

With the election now out of the way and with the two defeated, all parties hope the racial temperature in the country may cool.

However, Chua Soi Lek, the head of the MCA, said he was disappointed in the lack of support for the government, adding that the changed racial dynamic would "give rise to a situation where the government will be formed by all the races except the Chinese.

"This is a classic example where UMNO strengthened itself by having more MPs," he said. "They won big. And the DAP of course won big. The two-party system in this country now is where all the Chinese are in the opposition."

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