

October 7, 2002 Monday  
Surveys MAL1

**SECTION:** FT REPORT - **MALAYSIA** ; Pg. 4

**LENGTH:** 869 words

**HEADLINE:** Youth leaders occupy the new political vacuum: POLITICS by Douglas Wong: Despite victory in the last election, the government now has a significantly reduced majority.

**BYLINE:** By DOUGLAS WONG

**BODY:**

When Azalina Othman Said and Khairy Jamaluddin first came to public prominence in **Malaysia** four years ago, it was as hosts of a television talk show which gave unprecedented air time to government critics.

In an atmosphere of political uncertainty after the sacking and arrest of the former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, their guests included the opposition and civil society leaders who were leading public demonstrations against the government and who went on to champion a new political agenda for the country of justice and transparency.

Opposition included a new multi-racial party formed by supporters of Mr Anwar, which contested the 1999 general elections with high hopes of upsetting the coalition led by UMNO, the United Malays National Organisation, which had governed since independence.

"We hoped to change the political landscape by winning multi-racial seats as opposition success in the past has always been related to ethnicity," says Khalid Jaafar of Keadilan, the party led by Mr Anwar's wife.

But even with the loss of Mr Anwar's supporters, UMNO, with the help of its Chinese and Indian partners, was able to retain its two-thirds majority in parliament, as non-Malay voters rallied to their platform of stability and development. This happened partly out of fear of plans for an Islamic state by the Islamic party PAS, which was part of the opposition coalition.

Dateline **Malaysia**, the television talk show, had gone off the air long before the election, but Ms Azalina, a 38-year-old lawyer, and Mr Khairy, a 26-year-old writer, are in the public eye more than ever.

Despite the government's resounding parliamentary victory, the 1999 elections did mark a significant change in Malaysian politics with UMNO suffering from the barrage of corruption charges flung at it.

The party, which was formed to oppose British plans to grant independence to a territory in which immigrant Chinese and Indians would have equal rights to the indigenous Malays, saw its share of the popular vote in Malay dominated constituencies fall to 49 per cent from 62 per cent.

For the first time, UMNO took less than half of the total parliamentary seats won by the ruling coalition, and PAS won control of two states.

UMNO had to reverse this loss of support, and the induction of young professionals such as Ms Azalina and Mr Khairy has been one of its key strategies.

Mr Khairy was appointed to the executive council of UMNO's youth wing and also as a special adviser to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the deputy prime

minister and anointed successor to Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Ms Azalina was granted an even more prominent role - she was picked to head a new young women's wing of UMNO, giving her the status of an UMNO vice-president, of whom there are just six.

Their task was made easier by the weakening of the PAS challenge to UMNO after last year's Al-Qaeda attacks, which were followed by the withdrawal from the opposition alliance of its main Chinese based party.

PAS's moderate leader Fadzil Noor, who had been instrumental in building a coalition, died in June, leaving less moderate figures at the helm. The party has legislated to introduce Islamic law in the states it controls, brushing aside concerns even among Muslim women, who feel it is discriminatory.

PAS has also reverted to a Malay nationalist stance on government policies like re-introducing English language teaching and examining the country's affirmative action laws which have been around for three decades.

"The government's meritocracy programme means that UMNO has failed to look after Malay interests," says Mahfuz Omar, PAS youth leader, who believes that it has already overtaken UMNO as the dominant Malay party.

Even though the Islamic party would never be able to form a government without support from other non-Islamic parties, some political analysts believe that UMNO might consider drastic actions, even outlawing PAS if such a scenario were ever to be imminent.

Thus the support of the nearly 2m new voters on the rolls by the next elections due in 2004 is critical.

Besides new faces such as Ms Azalina and Mr Khairy, the coalition's component parties have been actively seeking new members and are setting up a formal joint youth wing with organisational support for the first time.

While the middle class, multi-racial, human rights focused reformasi movement which briefly emerged four years ago has disappeared as a party political force, its legacy is initiatives such as the new young women's wing of UMNO.

"Modern Muslim women and the Chinese and Indian communities have all exploited the greater political space that was created," says sociologist Professor Shamsul Amri Baharuddin.

Ms Azalina, a black belt in the martial art taekwondo (who does not wear a headscarf) has been widely praised for her organisational skills, but as elections approach for her position, the public have been witness to UMNO in-fighting again.

Police reports have been made accusing her of corruption and she is being challenged with the suspected support of other party power brokers.

If the transition of power to Abdullah Badawi from Dr Mahathir is in any way as internecine, Malaysian politics may yet hold out a few surprises.

**LOAD-DATE:** October 6, 2002