

Malaysian election results a blow to the Mahathir government

By John Roberts and Peter Symonds
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Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) have greeted the results of the country's November 29 elections with the usual self-congratulations. The ruling Barisan Nasional in which UMNO is the predominant partner, retained its overall two thirds majority. As Mahathir was quick to point out, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), until recently the main parliamentary opposition, lost two of its long-time leaders—its secretary-general Lim Kit Siang and his deputy Karpal Singh.

But there is every reason to believe that the behind-the-scenes discussion in UMNO's offices was not so jubilant. Despite its virtual monopoly of the press and backing from big business, the ruling alliance, particularly UMNO, suffered some major setbacks as a result of the anti-government sentiment in the wake of the Asian financial crisis and the expulsion and jailing of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Overall the vote for the BN parties was down 10 per cent—55 percent as compared with 65 percent in the 1995 elections. This is despite the exclusion of some 680,000 new and mainly younger voters who had registered to vote over the previous year and who the government feared would favour the opposition. Opposition groups have also alleged systematic ballot rigging—for example using the names of dead people who remain on the electoral rolls.

The government benefits from a long-standing gerrymander weighted towards rural Malay areas and to Sabah and Sarawak in northern Borneo. The size of the most populous electorate, Ampang Jaya with nearly 100,000 votes, is five times larger than the smallest, Hulu Rajang, with just over 16,000. As a result, the BN parties won 148 seats in the 193-seat national

parliament, while the main four-party opposition coalition with 40 percent of the vote gained only 42 seats. Three seats are held by another opposition party in Sabah.

Nevertheless the doubling of the total number of opposition seats from 22 in the previous parliament to 45 is a blow to the Mahathir government. Moreover, the brunt of the electoral losses was born by UMNO. Its representation in the federal parliament has fallen from 94 to 71, while its main coalition partners, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), held their ground.

Four cabinet ministers, including Domestic Trade Minister Megat Junid Megat Ayob, lost their seats as the opposition Muslim fundamentalist Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) made substantial gains in the north and east of the country—rural Malay areas previously dominated by UMNO.

In the 11 state elections held at the same time, PAS held onto Kelantan and gained power in neighbouring Terengganu, which has substantial reserves of oil and gas. It won virtually all seats, both state and federal, in the two states, and made inroads into the northern state of Kedah. The newly elected PAS government in Terengganu has already announced plans to implement Islamic law including a ban on gambling and the sale of alcohol to Muslims.

The Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party) formed this year by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, won five seats in its first elections. Commentators also pointed to the fact that Keadilan's overall vote was 11 percent and that it lost a number of seats near Kuala Lumpur to UMNO by narrow margins. Moreover, Azizah won her husband's former seat in Penang and thus has a parliamentary platform from which to continue her criticisms of the

government.

Despite losing two longstanding leaders, DAP, which is based primarily among Chinese voters, hung onto 10 seats but failed to make any significant gains. Defeated leader Lim Kit Siang described the result as “a catastrophic defeat with our traditional non-Malay and Chinese supporters abandoning the party”. Mahathir had been able to successfully play on the fears of Chinese and Indian voters that a vote for the DAP would only assist its electoral ally PAS and its plans for an Islamic state.

Lim's comments underscore the highly unstable character of the opposition coalition: DAP has always opposed any call for an Islamic state and laws yet it formed an electoral alliance with PAS. In the aftermath of the election it is unlikely that the opposition parties will remain in a coalition for long. The new DAP secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock has already warned that “future cooperation” would be affected if the PAS state governments implement policies, which “affect the rights of non-Muslims”.

The Islamic fundamentalists of PAS are the clearest winners, having increased their tally of seats in the federal parliament from eight to 27. Based in the northern rural areas, traditional UMNO heartland, they were able to exploit the disaffection among ethnic Malay voters over the dismissal and jailing of Anwar.

But, as a few commentators have noted, more fundamental processes are underway. An article in the December 10 issue of *Asiaweek* commented: “It's not just that BN saw its majority trimmed or that the opposition took the state of Terengganu or that a number of prominent BN candidates lost their seats. What is really significant about the various outcomes of the elections is that they collectively mark a major shift in the country's political landscape.”

The acrimonious split between Mahathir and Anwar was not simply a personal row between two individuals but revealed a deep divide in ruling circles. In the wake of the Asian financial crisis and the plunge of the Malaysian economy into recession, sections of big business, particularly those that had relied on their close associations with UMNO and the government, faced the prospect of bankruptcy as Anwar, as finance minister, maintained tight interest rates, cut government spending and foreshadowed the further opening up of the economy to international

competition. In September 1998, Mahathir overturned Anwar's policies and imposed tight foreign exchange and investment controls then sacked his deputy and expelled Anwar and his followers from UMNO—all in the space of a week.

The events of the last two years have not only ruptured the UMNO but have left a deep mark on public political consciousness. The Asian financial collapse has undermined one of the central pillars of the Mahathir government—its claim to be providing continuous economic growth and improved living standards. Furthermore the crude use of the police and the courts to jail Anwar on highly dubious charges of corruption and sexual misconduct has deeply shocked many Malaysians.

An article in *Australian Financial Review* warned of the growing hostility to the autocratic rule of UMNO and its allies who have held power in Malaysia since formal independence in 1957. “But in the future the middle class may be less willing to accept this political emasculation. Under a more equal distribution in which urban seats carried more weight, it is likely that the 'reformasi' Keadilan, headed by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, would have done better than its mere five seats. The middle class is also likely to lose patience with the heavy-handed bias in the established media that makes 'Pravda' at the height of Soviet communism look like a journal of informed criticism.”

For the present, Mahathir has hung onto power. But within the UMNO ranks, he will no doubt face criticisms over the party's losses, and, outside the party, growing hostility from sections of the middle class and working class. Far from ending the political instability of the last two years, the elections are simply an indication of the further turbulence that is to come.

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