

Election marks seismic shift in Malaysian politics

By John Roberts
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Malaysia's election, to be held tomorrow, is set to be the closest in the country's history. Despite an entrenched gerrymander in its favour, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition faces the possibility of losing to the opposition People's Alliance (PR) for the first time since formal independence in 1957.

Prime Minister Najib Razak is desperately seeking to cling to power. In the lead up to the election, his government made cash handouts to the country's poorest layers, with promises of more, and increased the salaries of public servants and the security forces. His United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the leading BN partner, is notorious for vote rigging, dirty tricks, intimidation and violence.

The police have reported over 1,400 cases of political violence since parliament was dissolved on April 13. Most have involved death threats, assaults on party campaigners and vandalism of election offices, flags and posters. An AFP report noted that the government-controlled mass media had given no indication of who was behind the violence. PR representatives have claimed that the opposition has been the target of most attacks.

The country's limited opinion polls indicate that the opposition was making ground over the government parties. On April 25, the University of Malaya's Centre for Democracy and Elections said opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was the preferred prime minister, at 43 percent, with Najib on 39 percent, a significant shift away from Najib since February. Anwar's PR was ahead of the BN by 42 percent to 36 percent, with 22 percent undecided.

In the previous election in 2008, the PR shocked the government by ending BN's two-thirds majority in the national parliament, and winning office in five states, including several of the country's most economically

developed. Due to the gerrymander, PR won 47 percent of the popular vote but secured only 37 percent of the seats in the national parliament.

Fundamental economic and social shifts in Malaysian society have undermined the social base of UMNO, whose authoritarian rule has rested on support from the country's ethnic Malay majority. Its New Economic Policy (NEP) has discriminated in favour of Malays, and against the substantial ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities, in education, business, government jobs and social benefits.

Powerful layers of big business, as well as international investors, are backing the opposition as the means of ending the NEP's restrictions and cronyism, implementing pro-market restructuring and opening up the Malaysian economy to foreign capital. Anwar's denunciations of "corruption and racism" are pitched to the corporate elite and their concerns about the economic future amid the deepening global breakdown.

Anwar's message is also aimed at an increasingly urbanised population, particularly youth, who are hostile to racial discrimination and the government's oppressive methods of rule. Anwar has used US President Obama's slogan of "change," or "ubah" in Malay, to exploit these sentiments. More than 2.6 million young voters, out of a total of 13.3 million, have registered and are eligible to cast a ballot for the first time tomorrow.

Najib has attempted to stem the tide against the BN through a two-pronged campaign. Publicly he has touted the government's cosmetic reforms to the NEP and anti-democratic laws, as well as its record of economic growth. He has appealed to voters to stick with the government and its Economic Transformation Program of infrastructure investment, warning of the

dangers of an untested opposition.

At the same time, as the *Economist* explained, “Out in the countryside, however, UMNO is conducting a very different campaign to scare voters away from the Pakatan [PR] and reassure the party’s base—older rural Malays known as *bumiputra* (“sons of the soil”)—that UMNO will continue to champion Malay rights.” Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad has reportedly been campaigning alongside leaders of the Malay chauvinist Perkasa organisation, which has strong links to UMNO despite being formally disowned by the latter.

The election could be decided in the key Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah, where the grip of BN-aligned parties ensured that the ruling coalition clung to power in 2008. In that election, the opposition won just two seats out of 56 in these two states, despite garnering 29 percent of the vote.

There is growing hostility in Borneo to the cronyism of the BN allies that have dominated the state administrations, and the continuing economic backwardness and poverty, despite oil and logging resources. In the 2011 state elections in Sarawak, the opposition made significant gains, increasing its share of the popular vote to 39 percent, and its seat numbers from 7 to 15 in the state assembly.

In Sabah, Anwar has promised higher oil and gas royalties to the Borneo states and to place ownership of oil companies in the hands of the state administration. The PR has also been able to exploit corruption scandals involving BN-aligned chief ministers of both states. Ethnic Chinese voters in Sabah are reportedly abandoning the BN’s conservative ethnic Chinese ally, the Malaysian Chinese Association, for the PR. The opposition is hoping to win 10 seats each in Sabah and Sarawak, as well as in the BN stronghold of Johor—the southern mainland state adjoining Singapore.

The most likely result of tomorrow’s poll is that it will mark the beginning of a new period of political instability. If BN clings to power, the frustration, especially among young voters, will be intense, particularly if the opposition secures a majority of votes, but loses as a result of gerrymandering. That hostility could generate more radical forms of opposition.

If Anwar wins office, the new PR government could face a backlash from the more extreme Malay

chauvinist organisations and groups. Moreover, the opposition coalition is fraught with divisions of its own. Alongside the People’s Justice Party (Keadilan) and the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), both of which are secular in outlook, it contains the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), which advocates an Islamic state.

More fundamentally, an Anwar government would implement the “free market” agenda demanded by big business that will inevitably involve a deepening assault on the social position of the working class and rural masses. International economic analysts have been highly critical of the handouts being promised by both sides during the campaign. The *Wall Street Journal* complained: “Handouts may swing the ballot. But poor policy for the sake of garnering votes is in no one’s best interests.”

Those voters who are hoping that Anwar’s slogan of “change” will mean improved living standards for working people and a flowering of democracy are in for a rude shock.

Anwar has a track record of backing regressive pro-market policies. During the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis Anwar was finance minister and deputy prime minister in the UMNO-led government. He was expelled, arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges after he advocated the International Monetary Fund’s restructuring program that would have impacted on UMNO’s business cronies.

Anwar was a militant Islamist youth leader in the 1970s before joining UMNO in 1982 and being rapidly promoted up its ranks. He never publicly opposed the grossly anti-democratic methods used by UMNO-led governments, including their use of detention without trial. In office, Anwar will be just as ruthless as the BN government in suppressing any resistance by the working class to his policies.

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