

Malaysia's murky politics

Mahathir crowns over Sabah election win

Peter Symonds
19 March 1999

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has hailed the results of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in last week's election in the state of Sabah as a "clear victory," saying he was "ecstatic". Mahathir, who visited the northern Borneo state four times during the campaign, has been under considerable political pressure following his sacking and expulsion of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim last September.

Mahathir's own United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the main BN component, won 24 of the 48 seats in the state assembly, and the coalition partners secured another seven. While the total of 31 seats is just short of the two-thirds majority required for constitutional change, the ruling coalition is able to appoint another six assemblymen to bolster its numbers. The opposition PBS (Sabah United Party) won the remaining 17 seats.

Superficially, the poll result appears to be a decisive win likely to improve Mahathir's chances in national elections due to be held before April 2000. A closer examination reveals a Byzantine political world dominated by vote buying and ballot rigging in which both government and opposition parties alike are based on exploiting religious and racial loyalties.

Just days before the election last Friday and Saturday, Mahathir announced that Sabah could only expect financial support if it returned a BN government. "We will only give to the BN government in Sabah. We will not help the opposition since we do not receive any assistance from them." Mahathir's comments paralleled vote-buying on a smaller scale as candidates sought to ingratiate themselves with voters through gifts of money and goods. Many people, particularly in more remote rural districts, are poor--in the rural Kiuli electorate, for instance, average monthly family income is estimated at less than \$US80.

The opposition PBS, which is based among the largely Christian Kadazandusuns, has accused Mahathir and the ruling coalition of widespread irregularities. The party has submitted a report to the local police claiming nearly 50,000 cases in which identity cards have been illegally issued to immigrants to enable them to vote in the elections. An estimated 600,000 of Sabah's 2.8 million are immigrants, mainly from neighbouring Indonesia and the Philippines, and being Muslim are considered more likely to vote for UMNO.

The PBS also claimed that the government rigged the state electoral boundaries along racial and religious lines to strongly favour the BN. Sabah's population is made up of about 30 different ethnic groups, including the Kadazandusuns who comprise 40 percent, Malays 32 percent and Chinese 22 percent. On religious lines, about 40 percent are classified as native Muslim, 40 percent native Christian and 20 percent others.

In 1995, the boundaries were changed so that the number of Muslim-dominated seats increased from 17 to 24. At the same time, the number of Kadazandusun-dominated seats was cut back from 23 to just 12; four were Chinese and eight others were mixed.

The results of the latest elections reveal a deep ethnic divide. UMNO won all 24 of the Muslim seats but its coalition partners standing in Kadazandusun seats were decimated, winning only two. The former chief minister Bernard Dompok lost his seat. The overall majority of the ruling coalition slumped from 43 in the previous assembly to 31.

The PBS, which held power in Sabah for nearly nine years until 1994, campaigned on a narrow appeal for the defence of local interests and Kadazandusun culture and language, blaming Filipino immigrants in particular for the loss of jobs and crime. PBS leader Joseph Pairin Kitingan has previously accused the federal

government based on the mainland of "colonising" Sabah. In response to Mahathir's threat to cut off funds to the state, Pairin responded: "You can criticise America for imposing sanctions on Iraq but you should not impose sanctions on one of your own states."

For the first two decades after Sabah was incorporated into Malaysia in 1963, UMNO attempted to manipulate the state's politics indirectly. For several years after winning the 1986 elections, the PBS itself was an uneasy partner in the BN coalition, along with its major rival, the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO). But only days before the Malaysian national elections in October 1990, the PBS pulled out of the coalition and openly campaigned for Mahathir's rival Tengku Razaleigh.

Mahathir denounced Pairin for this "stab in the back" and began to intervene directly in Sabah politics through the establishment of a local UMNO branch. Its ally the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) also established local branches in the state. Within a few months of the 1990 elections, Pairin was charged with three counts of corruption and his brother Jeffrey Kitingan was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for allegedly plotting Sabah's secession from Malaysia. He was held without charge for two years.

At the 1994 elections, UMNO used its control of the two state-owned TV stations as well as the UMNO-controlled TV3 to campaign against the PBS and attack Pairin in particular for corruption. UMNO finances were poured into the electorates in the form of cash gifts for voters. According to Pairin: "Money was virtually being thrown from helicopters and distributed freely in coffee shops."

The outcome was a narrow 25-23 victory for the PBS, which used its majority to appoint another six party members as assemblymen. But within two weeks, three PBS MPs had changed sides to the BN, reportedly after receiving substantial financial inducements. Further defections followed, the PBS government collapsed and for the first time an UMNO member was sworn in as chief minister.

The latest elections have only revealed heightened ethnic animosities and social tensions. Despite having poured money and the time of leading political figures into the recent campaign, UMNO and its allies lost 12 seats and its two thirds majority in the state assembly. These are not signs of stability but of deepening

political turmoil in Sabah and throughout Malaysia.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact