Impressions of the Malaysian elections: little to do with democracy

A correspondent
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Malaysians go to the polls today to elect the national parliament and also parliaments for most of its individual states. The campaign has been remarkably short—a mere eight days, or a little over two weeks, if one includes the period since Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad made a snap decision to cancel an overseas trip and dissolve parliament, paving the way for the early elections. By any standards, the election has little to do with any real democracy.

To a casual observer who happened to be travelling along the west coast of the Malay peninsula during the period leading up to the election, there was not a great deal to indicate that anything was taking place at all. Only in the final week or so did large numbers of party flags appear along the roads, at the intersections and outside houses and villages. Most were of the ruling Barisan Nasional [National Alliance] and the United Malays National Organisation [the dominant BN member].

There was little of the usual election hoopla—the banners, the rallies, the teeshirts, bumper stickers, cars festooned with flags—that could be seen in Indonesia during this year's national elections. There appeared to be little involvement by ordinary people in what was heralded by Mahathir as “the people's chance to decide”. There was a mood of indifference, a contempt for politics and politicians, and in some cases, a deep-seated hostility directed against the Mahathir government.

Mahathir never tires of explaining, in his rather smug, cynical style, that Malaysia has a long tradition of democracy and has held elections ever since formal independence in 1957. But any close examination reveals that the difference between the autocratic UMNO-led coalitions that have dominated Malaysia and the dictatorships that have existed in Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, and other countries is not so great.

The most obvious sign of the lack of any genuine democratic freedom is the media. One reads the English language newspapers and watches the TV news at first with disbelief, then intense irritation and finally with a mixture of bemusement and disgust. Every story reads like or sounds like a press release from the prime minister or one of his offsiders. Every one of them is fulsome in its praise of the government and its record of stability, unity and economic prosperity. Insofar as the opposition is mentioned at all, it is secondhand—a minister criticising the latest statement by an opposition leader, another warning of the threat to political stability if BN's grip over the parliament should drop.

Just as an exercise, I noted down one night the list of stories on the 8pm English language news on TV2: “BN will counter ‘baseless lies' and highlight its performance”; “Chinese community indebted to BN government for action over economic crisis”; “Kelantan UMNO-BN campaign to win back state”; “Government to provide low cost homes for Kuala Lumpur” and so on. Even the business news began with a report of a speech by the Deputy Prime Minister on the theme “People should be thankful for progress and peace”. One half expected that the weather report might include a glowing reference to the BN's role in ensuring appropriate levels of rain and sunshine. All of this was dutifully read straight-faced by two TV presenters, then the following morning appeared, as it does with monotonous regularity, in the headlines of all three English language newspapers—the *New Strait Times*, the *Star* and the *Sun*.

At one point in the campaign, Mahathir felt compelled to respond to criticisms that the opposition had no media access. Freedom of the press, he insisted, also meant that the right not to run stories, omitting to mention, of course, that most or all the major newspapers, TV and radio stations are either owned by the state or by individuals and companies closely liked to the ruling parties. He was particularly niggled by the criticisms in the few, relatively small circulation opposition newspapers such as *Harikah* produced by the Islamic fundamentalists of Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). Then he focussed on the international press, pointing out that they had covered the opposition campaign, and adding magnanimously, “and we have not banned their distribution in Malaysia”.

The government not only controls the press but knows it can count on the police and the courts to harass, intimidate and if necessary, jail its opponents should they prove too troublesome. Over their 40 years in power, UMNO and its allies have appointed all the judges and police chiefs as well as most other senior bureaucrats in the country. As in Suharto's Indonesia, there are a battery of anti-democratic laws on the books in Malaysia designed to muzzle the press, university students, public servants, the trade unions and political opponents.

The most glaring example has been the treatment meted out to one of their own—Anwar Ibrahim, until September 1998 the country's deputy prime minister, finance minister, close confidante and heir apparent to Mahathir. The crime of Anwar and his supporters was to back the demands of the IMF and oppose the economic policies of the Mahathir faction in the wake of the financial crisis in Asia. No sooner had currency and investment controls been put in place than Anwar was sacked, expelled from UMNO, and, when he began to mobilise anti-government rallies, was summarily arrested. He was physically beaten up by the country's chief of police himself.

Anwar was held incommunicado under the country's Internal Security Act—a draconian piece of legislation which allows for detention without trial. Only after over a week in jail was he dragged before a court and charged not with political crimes but with concocted allegations of corruption and sexual misconduct. He has been found guilty by a judge of some charges and is currently standing trial for sodomy.

Yet despite the fact that the government currently holds 80 percent of the parliamentary seats and their chief opponent is behind bars, the UMNO political juggernaut is intent on grinding down the opposition and blackening Anwar's name by every available means. In the final days of the campaign, a videotape began to circulate purporting to show that Anwar had engaged in sodomy, and a phoney edition of *Harikah* with material designed to undermine the opposition appeared at news stands.

More than anything else the viciousness of the campaign indicates that the old autocratic political structures are very brittle and that there is a concern in the ruling elites that for all their power their position is quite

tenuous. The fear is not so much Anwar and the opposition who have no fundamental differences with the government but rather the forces that may be unleashed among the working class and urban and rural poor.

The government exudes a certain born-to-rule arrogance not so very different from that of the British colonial rulers who dominated Singapore and Malaysia for a century and a half. Opposition to the ruling coalition is barely tolerated and its activities are regarded as illegitimate, bordering on treasonous. In a remarkable statement reported in the *Sun*, the deputy home minister berated PAS leaders for having the temerity to claim that they were going to win control of a number of states. It was irresponsible of PAS, he said, to raise the hope of its supporters is such a manner, adding that it was not the first time that PAS leaders had resorted to such tactics.

UMNO and its partners inherited from the British more than just the grand old colonial buildings that are to be found in Malaysia's cities. British rule rested on its carefully cultivated relations with the Malay sultanates and a layer of senior Malay civil servants educated at Oxford and Cambridge. After crushing the independence movement led by the Malayan Communist Party in an extended and ruthless anti-guerrilla war in late 1940s and 1950s, Britain handed over power to the conservative elements that formed UMNO. The only objection that UMNO ever had to its British masters was when the colonial power had suggested that the new nation should be based, nominally at least, on equality for all citizens—a measure which threatened to undermine the power and privileges of the Malay sultans and elites.

Malaysia's culture and cities reflect the country's history and remarkable diversity of influences—the Malays, the Chinese who traded and worked the tin mines, the southern Indians brought by the British as indentured labour for the rubber plantations as well as Ceylon Tamils who worked in the colonial administration, Arabs, Armenians and others. But like the British, the ruling elites have politically exploited these differences as a means of dividing the working class and setting one community against another. By granting a privileged position to the Malays, in reality to the Malay elites, the UMNO-led coalition reduced other groups—the Chinese and Indians—to the status of second-class citizens. Racial politics and racially-based parties have dominated ever since.

A sure sign that the opposition alliance is drawn from the same ruling circles is that it accepts the same fundamental political premises as the government. Its manifesto—a precarious balancing act between the various component parties—“abolishes the practice of ‘divide and rule' which has been practiced by the BN government in order to stay in power” and at the same time “upholds the Malay special privileges provision in the Constitution”. It contains both the PAS party which is dedicated to the reactionary ideal of an Islamic state and Shari'ah law, and the Democratic Action Party, based mainly among the Chinese community, that is deeply opposed to such changes.

All these parties are based among various sections of big business and layers of the middle class, who have prospered during the boom days of the Asian economic miracle. Central Kuala Lumpur with its skyline of new skyscrapers, topped by the Petronas Towers, offers ample evidence of privilege and wealth, as do the plethora of shopping malls stocked with the latest fashion clothes and goods, computers and electronic gadgets, and on the streets, the large number of late model cars, both homemade and imported. Malaysia, with its relatively small population of around 20 million, and substantial exports of agricultural and manufactured goods, is not India or Indonesia. Signs of poverty and backwardness, at least on the West Coast of peninsula Malaysia, are not immediately evident.

But they are nevertheless there. The poorest and most exploited layers of the working class are the immigrant workers brought under contract to labour on the building sites, in the plantations or in other dirty, dangerous and badly paid work. The tea plantations in the hill resort of the Cameron Highlands are no longer worked by indentured Indian labourers but by Bangladeshis and Indonesians who work long hours picking tea for 20 sen a kilogram, or about five US cents, and live in cramped conditions in wooden huts. Moreover in rural areas, the lack of decent housing and facilities is obvious even to a passing observer. On the East Coast, in areas where PAS is making inroads, even the official figures [1997] indicate high levels of poverty—19.2 percent in Kelantan and 17.3 percent in Terengganu, and 16.5 percent in Sabah on the island of Borneo.

There is no doubt that the financial crisis that hit Malaysia and the region has deepened the social divide between rich and poor, as well as exacerbating the tensions and frictions within the ruling class itself, revealed most sharply in the open break between Mahathir and his protégé Anwar. The BN propaganda relies heavily on its claims that the government's policies have been responsible for a rebound in the growth rates and holds out the prospects of renewed prosperity. But as elsewhere in Asia, the so-called recovery is tenuous, based on large inputs of government money and continuing exports to the US and Europe, and resting on a financial and banking system that is still very fragile. For all the official figures, there is plenty of visible evidence from stalled construction projects and empty real estate that, at least in the property sector, the much vaunted recovery is not all that it is made out to be.

And there are signs that the events of the last two years have left an indelible mark on political consciousness of broad layers of people. Anwar's lengthy trial revealed aspects of the everyday operations of the police, the courts, the press and the political and business elites that have deeply shocked many people. The economic crisis has raised questions about the myth of the Asian miracle. The only opinion poll to be published revealed that a staggering 42 percent of voters had not made up their mind who they were going to vote for less than a week and a half from the poll.

Among people with whom I spoke there were mixed reactions—some did not want to speak about politics, and others were contemptuous of all politicians. Some, however, had been drawn into politics and were deeply hostile to the manipulations of Mahathir and the government. How such moods translate into votes will be seen today. Many people who are critical of the ruling parties will probably end up voting for them—more of a statement about the lack of any genuine alternative being offered by the opposition than anything else.

However, one senses that even if Mahathir is returned the old methods of rule have been undermined and the political climate is changing. A chat with a bus driver gives an indication of the molecular processes underway. Discussing the appalling coverage in the Malaysian media, he said: “Yes I know. The government treats us like this but we are not idiots. We know what they are doing.” Sceptical that the elections would bring any change, he was at pains to make clear that he did not want a great deal. An Indian himself he was willing to concede a privileged position to the Malays, as long as everyone else was treated fairly. But why shouldn't everyone have equal rights—Malay, Indian and Chinese, I asked, all this just benefits the well-off and the rich. He didn't answer and just looked at me. It was clear that he found the idea of social equality novel and rather radical but at the same time, as he began to consider the question, also very enticing.