

A reader writes in on the Malaysian elections

11 December 1999

Chief Executive of Pakistan General Pervez Musharraf in a message to Mahathir Mohamed on his re-election has stated that it "is a testimony to the deep confidence reposed by the Malaysian people in his leadership." (Dawn, National, December 3, 1999).

This statement constitutes a highly ill-conceived and ill-informed diplomatic nicety.

Any informed reader knows that there has been a sustained global criticism of the snap elections in Malaysia ordered by Mahathir last month. For instance, the US State Department spokesperson James Rubin said the election process was hardly free and fair. "We also note that winning party figures enjoyed generally acknowledged advances, including the election's timing and unequal access to the media," Rubin said, according to an AFP despatch of December 1.

He voiced concerns that ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, sacked last year and jailed for six years in April for abusing his official powers, had been "convicted in a questionable proceeding".

Mahathir and his opportunist allies are finding it difficult to regain legitimacy in the face of large number of phantom voters, denial of voting rights to some 700,000 eligible voters, an unusually high number of spoilt votes, wax-coated ballot papers, a concerted smear campaign against Opposition figures with doctored video tapes and newspaper advertisements, scare tactics, intimidation of voters, and outright denial of media exposure to Opposition parties, among many other dirty tricks.

Mahathir and his collaborators have failed to retain their political hegemony. Instead of capturing the state of Kelantan they lost yet another state, Terengganu, to the Opposition.

In the 60 districts where Malays are at least two-thirds of the voters, Mahathir's United Malay National Organization (UMNO) won just 48.6 percent of the votes. The coalition, Barisan Nasional, won some 56 percent of the popular vote, down from 65 percent in

the last polls in 1995.

In this election UMNO lost 24 Parliamentary seats and 71 state seats in addition to four Cabinet Ministers and five Deputy Ministers. Mahathir's party lost more seats than any other component party in the coalition.

On the other hand, the Opposition doubled their presence in the Parliament.

Mahathir's own majority was slashed by some 7,000 votes in his home state of Kedah where the Opposition won more than half of the Parliamentary seats. Stung by the Opposition's success in Mahathir's own backyard, the Chief Minister of Kedah, Sanusi Junid, has announced his decision to step down.

The day General Musharraf sent his message to Malaysia, a political analyst of the Asian Wall Street Journal had this to say about Mahathir: "By hanging on to power at any cost, Dr. Mahathir has undermined the integrity of Malaysia's democratic institutions, including the parliament, the press, the police and the judicial system. What is most abhorrent is his insistence on wearing the hypocritical hat of "democracy," while practicing totalitarianism."

General Musharraf has announced that he is committed to the introduction of a "real" democracy in Pakistan. How does his applause on the perpetuation of a sham democracy in Malaysia fare with the stated objectives of his administration?

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I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny upon the mind of man—Thomas Jefferson



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