

Government routs opposition parties in Malaysian elections

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The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi scored its largest-ever electoral win at the national polls in Malaysia on March 21. BN won 198 of the total of 219 parliamentary seats, up 50 from the 1999 election. Badawi's own United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the major component of the BN coalition, increased its seats from 71 to 109.

UMNO's major rival for the ethnic Malay vote, the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which made significant gains at the 1999 election, lost heavily. Not only did the number of PAS seats slump from 27 to just seven nationally, but the party also lost control of the state legislature in the northern state of Terengganu and only retained office in neighbouring Kelantan by a margin of 24 to 20 for the BN. In Terengganu, PAS won only two of the 32 seats in the state assembly.

The opposition National Justice Party or Keadilan, formed in 1999 by Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of deposed deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, lost four of its five seats in federal parliament. Wan Ismail held onto her husband's old seat in Penang, but only after four recounts and with a much-reduced majority of just 590 votes—down from over 9,000 in 1999. Keadilan and PAS were both part of a loose opposition coalition known as Barisan Alternatif (BA).

The only opposition party to hold its ground was the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which left the BA coalition after disputes over PAS's program for the establishment of an Islamic state. Based primarily on the country's ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities, two of DAP's most prominent leaders, Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh, won back the seats they lost in 1999.

A victory for the BN was never seriously in doubt. Even after the 1999 election, the ruling coalition, which

has held power continuously since formal independence in 1957, still had the two-thirds parliamentary majority required to amend the country's constitution. UMNO continues to benefit from a gerrymander that favours rural Malay seats on peninsular Malaya as well as Sabah and Sarawak in northern Borneo.

The opposition parties were also hampered by a very short official campaign period of just eight days and their lack of media coverage. UMNO and its allies also enjoy a virtual monopoly over the mainstream media. Since the last elections, PAS's newspaper *Harakah* has been restricted to twice-monthly publication and its sales are confined to party members only.

Following the election, opposition leaders have complained of electoral irregularities. A local monitoring organisation, Malaysians for Free and Fair Elections, has called for the resignation of the election commission chief and his entire team, saying the poll was the worst managed since independence.

Entrenched anti-democratic practices undoubtedly played a role in the election outcome. In the final analysis, however, the opposition losses stem from their politics. The opposition parties represent dissident factions of the ruling elite that have no fundamental differences with UMNO and offer no progressive alternative for ordinary working people.

The 1999 elections took place in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, which increased unemployment and poverty in Malaysia and resulted in a sharp split in UMNO over economic policy. Anwar Ibrahim, who was finance minister at the time, backed the IMF's free market reforms which in turn threatened the economic interests of a layer of Malay businesses closely linked to UMNO.

Mahathir opposed IMF agenda and imposed currency and capital controls. When Anwar refused to resign

from his post, he was sacked and, along with his supporters, expelled from the party. After his protest campaign against corruption began to gather momentum, Anwar was summarily arrested, initially under the country's notorious Internal Security Act (ISA), and then jailed for 15 years on trumped-up charges of abuse of authority and sodomy.

PAS, Keadilan and DAP formed the Barisan Alternatif and exploited the widespread anger at Anwar's treatment by campaigning against corruption and for democratic reform. But it was a disparate union based on political expediency without a common program or platform. DAP quit the coalition shortly after the 1999 election after it became clear that PAS's demand for an Islamic state alienated ethnic Chinese and Indian voters.

Mahathir further isolated PAS after the September 11 attacks on the US by accusing it of being linked to Islamic extremism and terrorism. He and Badawi, who was the home minister, used the ISA to detain more than 90 people on suspicion of terrorism, including senior PAS figures such as Nik Adli Nik Abdul Aziz, the son of Kelantan chief minister Nik Aziz Nik Mat. Last September, Badawi extended the detention without trial of nine PAS members for a further two years.

In the recent election campaign, UMNO attacked PAS on its record in the two states under its control—Terengganu and Kelantan—which remain among the most impoverished areas of the country. BN promised a package of economic incentives, including job creation, a university, the expansion of the local airport and an Islamic college. The campaign clearly had an impact. The Singapore based *Straits Times* quoted a Terengganu voter who supported PAS bans on gambling, karaoke lounges and public entertainment involving women and added: "But we need something tangible as well, like more jobs and economic growth in the state."

After taking over from Mahathir last October, Badawi nullified the potential threat from Keadilan by promising his own crackdown on corruption. One of his first moves was to defer an \$US3.8 billion rail project which Mahathir had approved and controversially awarded to Malaysian tycoon Syed Mokhtar Al Bukhary. Badawi has also approved a number of token prosecutions on corruption charges, including a former chief of the national steel company and a former

cabinet minister.

Behind the concern over economic reform has been Malaysia's need to compete for investment funds, which have slumped since 2001. Last year's GDP growth rate of over four percent has depended substantially on government spending and domestic demand. The 2004 budget deficit is forecast to be around 3.3 percent of GDP and large-scale bond sales have been necessary to finance the present spending and previously accumulated debt.

Keadilan's other election plank—opposing the jailing of Anwar—has largely been pushed into the background—in no small part due to the attitude of the Bush administration. While Mahathir voiced criticisms about Washington's invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, behind the scenes his government has been largely supportive of the US "global war on terrorism." In return, the White House has remained all but silent on Anwar's treatment and the abuse of democratic rights in Malaysia in general.

Badawi now has an extraordinary 90 percent of seats in the national parliament and control of 11 of the country's 12 national assemblies. But his success depends on a rather uncertain economic recovery and expectations on the part of broad layers of the population that the government cannot meet. Beneath the surface there continues to be discontent over the continuing attacks on basic democratic rights and hostility to the government's close relations with the Bush administration.



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