

Malaysians due to vote after stunted 13-day election campaign

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Elections for the Malaysian national parliament and state legislatures take place on Saturday. Economic issues have dominated the brief 13-day campaign, with government and opposition parties seeking to address widespread concerns over inflation and the prospect of an international downturn. Despite a growth rate of 6 percent spurred on by strong exports, Malaysian people confront a looming recession in the US, the country's main market, and rapidly rising prices, particularly for fuel and basic food items.

A survey conducted in late February by the Merdeka Centre found that three quarters of Malaysians were pessimistic about the cost of goods and services. The poll found that 20 percent ranked economic issues such as inflation and jobs as their top priority in the election, as opposed to 13 percent who nominated crime and public safety and 11 percent who identified race relations.

The *International Herald Tribune* commented on February 26: "The assumed peak of the economic cycle explains why the election is being held now when [Prime Minister] Abdullah [Badawi] could have waited a year. Judging by history, a vote now should ensure few discomforts for the governing party." Despite an overwhelming majority in parliament, the ruling 14-party Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition feared that opposition parties could make significant gains if the election were held amid a deteriorating economy and rising social discontent.

The timing of the election was particularly intended to prevent prominent opposition figure, Anwar Ibrahim, a former deputy prime minister and treasurer, from re-entering parliament. Anwar is banned from holding political office until April, due to his conviction in 1999 on corruption charges. His conviction was part of a politically-motivated frame-up following his bitter split with then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad over how to respond to the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998.

The BN, which is dominated by Abdullah's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), is virtually assured of a victory and another five years in office on Saturday. The coalition held 198 of the 219 seats in the previous parliament, with UMNO holding 109. UMNO, which has held power in Malaysia since the country's independence from Britain in 1957, has substantial financial resources and holds a tight grip over the state apparatus.

The electoral system is gerrymandered in its favour. There are widespread allegations of electoral fraud, ranging from thousands of deceased being left on the electoral rolls, to the rigging of postal votes in marginal seats. Moreover, the Malaysian media is one of the most compliant in the world. In elections, it functions as little more than a government agency, providing blanket favourable coverage of the BN's campaign and denigrating or censoring the opposition.

The opposition parties are trying to prevent BN from winning a two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time since 1969, thereby stripping it of the ability to change the constitution at whim. Anwar told the media that he thought his Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) could collectively win more than 74 of 222 seats at stake and "deny Barisan Nasional a two-thirds majority".

Keadilan is standing up to 100 candidates and hopes to win 20 to 25 seats. Anwar's wife and party president, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, is standing again for the seat she holds and stated on February 23: "If I win, I will make way for my husband to contest for this seat in a by-election after the ban under the law, which bars him from contesting until this April, ends." Anwar's 27-year-old daughter, Nurul Izzah Anwar, is also running as a Keadilan candidate.

Anwar has drawn large crowds to Keadilan rallies. The

party is promising free education, lower petrol prices, justice for ethnic Indian protestors jailed under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) and a higher minimum wage. Central to its campaign is the call for the replacement of UMNO's New Economic Policy (NEP) with another economic strategy.

The NEP, a communalist measure introduced by UMNO in 1971, institutionalises discrimination against ethnic Chinese and Indians in favour of the majority ethnic Malays. Malay-owned businesses, in particular, are given preferential treatment. Anwar has denounced the policy as only benefiting a small layer of the ruling elite around UMNO, not the vast bulk of the population.

The other opposition parties have also stressed economic issues. DAP has promised a 6,000 ringgit (\$US1,877) subsidy to poor households and vowed to attack BN economic cronyism by issuing state contracts fairly through open tenders. PAS has pledged to set up subsidies for small businesses, greater access to health care, lower prices and the construction of low-cost homes if it retains government in the state of Kelantan, which it has held since 1990.

The government's nervousness over the impact of the opposition is apparent. BN launched a media blitz on television and in the newspapers last month under the slogan "security, peace, prosperity". The advertisements emphasised that the government's total spending of 43.3 billion ringgit (\$US13.7 billion) to subsidise fuel, flour, cooking oil and sugar had produced lower prices than those in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore. "All Malaysians enjoy lower prices and have more money in their pockets because we care ... Only one choice: Barisan Nasional," it stated.

The BN campaign has swamped marginal seats, particularly targeting Kelantan in order to dislodge PAS. Nationally, Abdullah has demagogically promised to create two million jobs within five years and cut the proportion of Malaysians living in poverty from 3.5 percent of the population to 2.8 percent by 2010.

In order to challenge BN, Keadilan, DAP and PAS have agreed to field only one candidate in each electorate. This means that DAP is mainly standing in majority Chinese areas, and Keadilan and PAS in Malay districts. The opposition parties are mired in the same communal politics as the government and are incapable of advancing any genuinely progressive alternative to UMNO's rule.

Despite their populist appeals to end corruption, communalism and inequality, Anwar and Keadilan speak for a wing of the ruling class that has concluded that the

economic protectionism and nepotism associated with the NEP is rendering Malaysia uncompetitive in the world market. The pro-government press never tires of pointing out that Anwar has re-invented himself, as he loyally served in UMNO governments for 16 years, overseeing the NEP and enforcing anti-democratic repression of dissent.

Anwar's opposition to the NEP is bound up with the interests of more globally-oriented sections of Malaysian capital that regard it as an unacceptable constraint in the struggle for investment and export opportunities with their regional rivals. The logic of Anwar's economic program, including deregulation and privatisation, would necessarily involve major attacks on wages, conditions and living standards.

Similarly, DAP reflects the desire of sections of the ethnic Chinese business elite for major changes to Malaysia's economic and political setup. DAP leader Lim Kit Siang has stressed in the election campaign not only the building of a "democratic" and "just" Malaysia, but one that is "competitive".

PAS, by contrast, articulates the views of the Islamic religious establishment and a layer of ethnic Malays in the more backward and rural areas of the country. Its advocacy of an Islamic state would consolidate the political position of these layers and thus alienates the country's substantial Chinese and Indian minorities. In this election, PAS has played down its Islamist program in order to reach an election deal with other opposition parties, particularly DAP.

While Abdullah calculates that the election will enable BN to gain another five years in office, the very fact that it has been held early points to economic and political turmoil ahead. In recent months, a series of public demonstrations have erupted for the first time since 1998—over demands for electoral reform, against anti-Indian discrimination and to protest prices rises. In each case, the government has responded with an overwhelming police presence, arrests and arbitrary detentions.



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