

Malaysian opposition leader refuses to concede election defeat

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Preliminary results in Malaysia's national election yesterday gave the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) a clear lead of 133 seats in the 222-seat national parliament, against 89 for the opposition People's Alliance (PR). The Election Commission announced a record turnout of 80 percent, or 10 million voters.

The outcome of what had been predicted to be Malaysia's closest-ever election could lead to political turmoil. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has refused to concede defeat until the Election Commission (EC) has answered the PR's allegations of electoral fraud. He accused the EC of being "complicit to the crime."

"It is an election that we consider fraudulent and the EC has failed," Anwar said. He claimed that the BN had flown up to 40,000 "dubious" voters, including "foreigners," to marginal seats across the country. The accusation, directed at Indonesian, Filipino and Bangladeshi immigrant workers, has more than a tinge of racism about it.

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the main BN partner, has ruled ever since the country's formal independence from Britain in 1957. It is notorious for its dirty tricks and ballot rigging, as well as a gerrymander that favours its social base among rural ethnic Malays. In the previous election in 2008, the BN won just 51 percent of the vote but gained 63 percent of the seats in the national parliament.

Pro-opposition social media sites are full of allegations of vote rigging, including multiple voting. The indelible ink used to mark the fingers of those who had voted, reportedly washed off easily. The inking procedure was virtually the only concession made by the government to demands that it and the EC ensure a fair election.

Prime Minister Najib Razak claimed victory and declared that the poll had been "true, fair and

transparent." He acknowledged that BN had flown many voters into marginal electorates, but denied that the government had funded the fares. He claimed that BN supporters had paid for the tickets and that it was routine for people to return home so they could vote.

Clearly concerned about the prospect of political unrest, Najib urged Malaysians to "show the world we are a mature democracy" and called for "national reconciliation." He added: "Overall, the results show a trend of polarisation which worries the government. If it is not addressed, it can create tension or division in the country."

Najib conceded that ethnic Chinese, who make up about a quarter of the population, deserted the ruling coalition in droves—a continuation of the trend in the 2008 election. He said the BN had suffered a "Chinese tsunami" in parts of the country and promised that his government would "move to more moderate and accommodative policies."

For decades, UMNO's New Economic Policy (NEP) has openly discriminated in favour of ethnic Malays in education, business, government jobs and social services. This communal policy is not only deeply resented by the country's Chinese and Indian minorities, but has been increasingly regarded in business circles as an obstacle to foreign and domestic investors. Najib made cosmetic changes to the NEP, which the opposition pledged to abolish.

In Penang, where there is an ethnic Chinese majority, the opposition increased its vote and retained control of the state government. It also appears likely to continue to rule in the industrial state of Selangor. Other results are yet to be finalised. In 2008, the opposition won control of five states.

The electorate was polarised in more ways than one, however. Many younger voters, casting a ballot for the

first time, were expected to vote for the opposition. Anwar's vague promise of "ubah," or change, appealed to the frustrations over UMNO's discriminatory policies and anti-democratic methods of rule. Thousands of opposition voters replaced their Facebook profile photos with black boxes to register their dismay at the result.

There is also a deepening social divide between rich and poor. Najib attempted to effectively buy the votes of some of the poorest layers of the population with government cash handouts, and promises of more if BN were re-elected. However, neither the government nor the opposition is capable of addressing the social needs of the working class.

In advance, the police banned all victory parades and street demonstrations following the election.

The election result could exacerbate tensions within the government and UMNO. Najib had promised to regain BN's two-thirds parliamentary majority, which it lost at the 2008 election, and win back control of the state assembly in Selangor. The government, however, has lost electorates to the opposition. Three prominent cabinet ministers have lost their seats, along with at least one BN state chief minister.

Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who had been highly critical of the government, warned Najib that he faced a revolt within UMNO if he did not improve over the 2008 election result. Najib had replaced Abdullah Badawi as leader in 2009 after Abdullah was blamed for the poor outcome.

In yesterday's election, Mahathir backed Ibrahim Ali, leader of the openly Malay chauvinist organisation Perkasa, who stood for a seat in the state of Kelantan, but lost to the opposition.

It is not clear whether the opposition will continue to refuse to concede defeat and mount a public campaign against the result. Anwar has the backing of powerful sections of big business that regard the PR as a vehicle for pushing through their demands for pro-market restructuring, including an end to the NEP, and the slashing of public spending.

While the Malaysian economy is currently growing at around 5 percent, there are fears in corporate circles about the impact of the deepening global economic breakdown. Najib has attempted to appeal to big business with plans to spend a massive \$444 billion on upgrading infrastructure. But there have been growing

criticisms from financial commentators about the level of the budget deficit and Malaysia's public debt.

These sharp divisions in ruling circles, together with widespread popular frustration over the election outcome, are a potent mix that could trigger unrest.



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