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THE 1999 GENERAL ELECTIONS: A PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW

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About the Speaker

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THE 1999 GENERAL ELECTIONS: A PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW

The 1999 Malaysian General Elections held on 29 November 1999, the tenth since *merdeka* in 1957 and the last before the new Millennium, was ample testimony of political participation in a “semi-” or “quasi-democracy”ⁱ — an opportunity for the people of this multiracial country of 22 million to choose their government. Viewed against the context of Malaysia’s political development experience, the 1999 election results provided a barometer of the electorate’s choice and an expression of happiness or dissatisfaction with the government in power and its adversaries. Given restricted opportunities for political participation in what Michael Ong calls a “limited democracy”ⁱⁱ, however, the casting of votes in the Malaysian electoral process can be seen as not only citizenship behaviour but also a tacit acceptance of the extant political “rules of the game” in Malaysia. Given this consideration, it should be reminded at the outset that the 1999 Malaysian elections is only part of this polity’s larger and complex political fabric.

What is most apparent about the 1999 elections is that it could have been a turning point in Malaysia’s political travails, *if*, that is, the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (BN, or “National Front”) had lost the election, or if the combined opposition known as the *Barisan Alternatif* (BA, or “Alternative Front”) had been able to deny the two-thirds majority (of seats) in the Lower House of Parliament, heretofore always secured by the BN. These scenarios were plausible enough in the aftermath of the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim on September 2, 1998; after that date, the Malaysian political scene could be viewed in “turmoil”ⁱⁱⁱ, with intermittent street demonstrations in the capital and the drama of the court trials of Anwar.^{iv} To put it another way, the 1999 elections could have been the “Fight of the Decade” in terms of

Malaysia's domestic politics context, and not fulfilling "a foregone conclusion" as had been the results of earlier elections.

In the event, however, the 1999 election result was essentially a repeat of the past, in that nothing much changed between the incumbents in power — the ruling BN government — and the opposition. That is, the BN continues to rule and the opposition continues to oppose. No doubt the voice of the opposition has become more strident, more assertive, more daring before the election; the government, on the other hand, had seemed more hesitant, not as forceful in showing its hand as before, in some ways even defensive. But this in retrospect was only a veneer over the more permanent setting of Malaysia's racial politics and that of Malay political dominance vis-à-vis the position of the non-Malays. If anything, the results of the 1999 elections only displayed the growing specter of the Islamic element in Malay and Malaysian politics, which could plausibly in the long run unravel the role of moderation that had been a factor for the country's stability.^v

The BA as a combined opposition was clearly a more formidable force than earlier opposition coalitions manifest during earlier elections: the BA's cohesion enabled it to engage the BN in straight fights in 152 parliamentary and 367 state constituencies. This meant that the BN could not hope for split votes between rivals of the opposition which in the past had been prevalent. Nevertheless, given the diametrically opposite ideologies of the various BA components, it is interesting to see if the coalition can be sustained and be a permanent feature of the political landscape. The BA's emergence might be seen as a refreshing development, even if politics make strange bedfellows, and if it goes beyond being an electoral pact could contribute to the making of a two-party political system in Malaysia.

One can cynically observe that the 1999 elections was "much ado about nothing". In spite of the "turmoil" mentioned above, even the BA was quite realistic that it had no chance of an electoral win. Denying the BN a two-thirds majority was a more realizable goal, and this provided a more dramatic air of contestation than heretofore. But, in a larger way the elections was not suggestive of a major transformation of Malaysian politics in which issues such as Malay political dominance, greater openness in the political arena, of opportunities for dissent, corruption in high places and so on, were seriously broached. Some of these issue-

areas were raised (such as whether a non-Malay could become the prime minister), but the voters' choice was to keep the system and the BN in power, and as noted by one observer, the BA was "no alternative at all."^{vi} As in 1995, the 1999 results support Bridget Welsh's contention: "Elections are generally held to be the most accurate demonstrations of public will, and clearly Malaysians support the existing regime."^{vii}

The ruling BN was quite confident of winning, from the start, and in retrospect was quite complacent of the anticipated success. Even the two-thirds seats majority was not seriously in doubt. But, more than in the past, the 1999 elections did lay bare the tenure of the position of Prime Minister Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and of his policies — a situation juxtaposed vividly in the light of Anwar's dismissal and removal, the heir-apparent Dr Mahathir himself had brought into the political limelight and prominence. Anwar did not contest, but was acknowledged by the BA to be their choice of premier in the event they won. His wife Dr. Wan Azizah shouldered the mantle of leadership in surrogate form through the newly-formed keADILan ("Justice") Party.

Supporters of the BA have called the 1999 elections and the campaigns waged officially and "unofficially" (i.e. before the elections date was announced) as a "bruising" one, denoting ferocity and the "below-the-belt" tactics (such as "scare" advertisements of racial riots in the media by the BN). Months before the elections, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) had waged a "flag campaign" by having many of its flags flown high and ubiquitously in many parts of the country — an act technically illegal before the election campaign period. After the Anwar arrest, and his subsequent corruption trial, PAS was able to increase the circulation of its party newspaper *Harakah* through its own version of these events and the sensationalisation of other political stories. The BN government however, "allowed" the public circulation of *Harakah*, although such circulation to non-members was prohibited under law.^{viii}

The 1999 elections indicated the continuing salience of ethnicity as a major element of national politics, that is the contest between Malays and non-Malays. The BN concept of "power-sharing" among the races, however, was more cogently challenged this time by the BA. Certainly, the Opposition's attempts at being more than an electoral pact indicated its greater cohesion, especially the ability to reconcile

the PAS Islamic ideology and the Democratic Action Party's (DAP) more secular political approach.

The election was at two levels — federal parliamentary (Lower House) seats, and control of the state governments in peninsular Malaysia (state elections for Sabah and Sarawak are held separately). In a centralized federal setting such as Malaysia's, winning control of state governments are almost as important as winning control of Parliament, or at least as the conventional wisdom would indicate in the nature of the BN government and its components at state level. Based on single-number constituencies, candidates win by having the largest number of votes or "first-past-the post". Thus the number of seats won need not necessarily coincide with commensurate number of votes cast as the system is not based on proportional representation. This led Syed Husin Ali, leader of the *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* (PRM or Malaysian People's Party) to comment thus after the election: "Despite all its efforts, the BN managed to garner only about 56 per cent of the votes, although it won 77 per cent of the parliamentary seats."^{ix} However, margins of support or non-support may be meaningless, as the prevailing system practised in Malaysia indicates that "a miss is as good as a mile".

It may be observed that elections in Malaysia are also indicative of political fortunes on the ascendant or in decline. Even the act of nomination of candidates is a process that is keen, especially in the ruling BN. Both for the BN and the BA, *who* the candidates are is important, not just the credentials of their party affiliation.

Outcome

First, the BN won the parliamentary battle, pure and simple, and will be in power for the next 5 years. It also won in all peninsular states, except Kelantan and Terengganu. (It was already in power in Sabah and Sarawak). This performance compares favourably with previous elections as can be seen from the statistical summary in Table I. Table II provides a comparison of the BN's performance against the opposition and the status of their strengths from 1995 to 1999. By winning 148 seats, the BN was well above the 129 necessary for the targeted two-thirds majority. The result was a loss of 8.6 per cent to the 162 seats obtained in 1995 (See Table II), but it was a comfortable win, and a margin most Western governments would like to have.

Second, the PAS performed remarkably well. It retained Kelantan state and also wrested control of Terengganu from the BN. PAS's strength in Parliament increased to 27 seats in 1999 from the 7 it won in the 1995 elections — a staggering 285 per cent jump (see Table II). Similarly, at state level, its strength increased 196 per cent, from 33 seats in 1995 to 98 in 1999. Based on this spectacular showing, it now has assumed the mantle of leadership of the opposition in Parliament, previously held by DAP's Lim Kit Siang. Its take-over in Terengganu also portends the imposition of Islamic-style governance with its ramifications to Malaysia's present form of government. But, as Lim Kit Siang, the DAP leader astutely observed, it would mean UMNO would become "more Islamic" in order politically to counter PAS. Although an immediate analysis of the PAS win in Terengganu was seen by many as an "upset" to the BN and portends a rising wave of Islamisation, the inroads made by PAS are suggestive of a longer-term trend evident already in the 1995 elections. Indeed, as Gomez notes of that election, "a slight swing in favour of the opposition would have been sufficient for it to form the state government."^x Thus, the PAS victory in Terengganu is perhaps not a surprising outcome after all. Overall, the PAS gains indicate the contest with UMNO for the Malay heartland states would be even more intense in future. On the other hand, if PAS wishes to be a real alternative at the national level, it would have to do more to win non-Malay support.

Third, the 1999 results have provided a severe wake-up call to UMNO, which saw its strength in Parliament reduced from 94 to 72, and the loss of a significant number of its "stalwarts personalities". While UMNO will obviously engage in soul-searching for its reduced support, it is apparent it cannot expect 100 per cent support from a rapidly changing Malay population based simply on its "Malay credentials". More importantly, UMNO must now ponder how it will strategically engage in the contest for the Malay vote with PAS.

Fourth, the 1999 elections were not favorable for the DAP. Although it managed to secure an extra parliamentary seat in 1999 over the 9 seats it won in 1995, meaning an 11 per cent gain, its stalwarts Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh were not returned. The failure of these two personalities marks perhaps the end of an era of the lively views they represented in the BN-dominated legislatures at state and federal levels. Also, the DAP's lackluster electoral performance may mean its role as

representing the non-Malays may be subject to review. As noted by P. Ramasamy, its alliance with PAS has weakened it such that its “poor performance was mainly due to the lack of non-Malay support.”^{xi}

Fifth, looking at the electoral trends, the percentages of votes for the BN is leveling off at about 55 per cent. The opposition percentage is about the middle forties (see Table I). The opposition has been performing rather well, steadily increasing the number of seats it has won since 1974, however it suffered a major reduction in 1995 after a major increase in 1990. It is possible the fluctuation will only be reduced once the opposition becomes a more consolidated force. The BN’s strength is both formidable and comfortable in terms of the number of seats, but it is uncertain if further delineation of constituencies may occur in order to sustain this advantage. As indicated earlier, the number of votes cast versus the number of seats won is not commensurate because of the single-member constituency system in place. Whatever the merits of this system, it has meant the existence of a “one-party dominant plus” setting and is likely to remain so for the immediate future.

Sixth, keADILan’s performance in winning 5 parliamentary and 4 state seats is a good start, but its outstanding leaders lost their bids except for Dr. Wan Azizah. If it had stood alone and not as part of the BA, its showing may have even been worse, and without Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim playing a prominent role and as the icon of its struggle, its future is also somewhat uncertain. It is unlikely that keADILan can be an alternative party for the Malay vote, and in the 1999 election it’s wins rode on the coat tails of PAS.

CONCLUSION

As indicated earlier, the results of elections in Malaysia are only a sampling of the complexities of the country’s politics. However, the 1999 elections indicate to the ruling BN that it cannot assume perpetual victory even if the basis of national politics is ethnic in character. Malay support for UMNO is also not assured, although UMNO or the BN’s success was due to non-Malay votes and BN’s steadfast position in the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak. That said, voting in 1999 still manifested ethnic affiliation in national politics — as such, the ethnicity paradigm remains intact.

The 1999 elections demonstrated the emergence of PAS as a party able to garner the Malay vote, a prospect that the ruling BN, in particular UMNO, must now contend with. However, while clearly Islam has an appeal to the masses in the Malay heartland, PAS's advocacy of a theocratic regime remains unpalatable to the non-Malays (including some of its political allies) and more modern Malays. As such, unless it adopts a more secular stance (recently commented on as a possible strategy by Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew), PAS cannot expect to be a viable national political alternative.

It may be observed that the reduced majorities of the BN and the gains of the opposition may have been due to a greater awareness in the electorate of the ruling BN's, *inter alia*, excesses in terms of massive public projects and its handling of the Anwar case. Indeed, while the Anwar case was not a major election issue, it did probably have an effect in affecting the ruling BN's credibility. This raises the question of whether the election result was also one of the electorate registering protest against the BN government, rather than seeking to replace it with an alternative.

A more exhaustive study of the 1999 elections is in order, including longitudinal and attitude surveys which will help to clarify existing lacunae about voter behavior, ethnicity and party affiliation.^{xii} However, the BN's victory in 1999 is an endorsement of voter preference for strong government *a la* the Barisan Nasional and of Dr. Mahathir's staying power in Malaysian politics against all odds, including the financial crisis of 1997 that swept Asia. Reduction in support for the BN has not robbed it of victory at the polls, although voices of the opposition claim it has suffered a moral defeat. One can be assured the BN will now awaken to the new political realities with greater awareness and vigour.

Table I. STRENGTH OF GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION IN THE MALAYSIAN DEWAN RAKYAT (LOWER HOUSE), 1959-1999 BY SEATS AND PERCENTAGE OF VOTES WON

Election	Government*			Opposition			Total
Year	Number of Seats	Percent of Seats	Percent of Votes	Number of Seats	Percent of Seats	Percent of Votes	Number of Seats
1959**	74	71.15	51.7	30	28.85	48.3	104
1964**	89	85.58	58.5	15	14.42	41.5	104
1969	95	66.00	49.3	49	34.00	50.7	144
1974	135	87.66	60.7	19	12.34	39.3	154
1978	130	84.42	57.2	24	15.58	42.8	154
1982	132	85.71	60.5	22	14.29	39.5	154
1986	148	83.62	55.8	29	16.38	41.5	177
1990	127	70.55	53.4	53	29.45	46.6	180
1995	162	84.38	65.2	30	15.62	34.8	192
1999	148	76.68	56.5	45	23.32	43.5	193

* Government means the Alliance for 1959 and 1964, the Alliance and coalition partner the Sarawak United People's Party for 1969, and the Barisan Nasional from 1974

** 1959 figures are for Malaya. Similarly, 1964 figures are only for Peninsular Malaysia as parliamentary elections were not held in Sabah and Sarawak.

Sources: Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "Malaysia: Quasi Democracy in a Divided Society", in Larry Diamond, Juan Linz and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds. *Democracy on Developing Countries, Asia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1989) p. 258; Election Commission, *Report on the Parliamentary and State Legislative Assembly General Elections 1969*, Government Printer, Kuala Lumpur, 1972; K.J. Ratnam & R.S. Milne, *The Malayan Parliamentary Election of 1964*, University of Malaya Press, 1967, p. 361, Table xx; Khong Kim-Hong, *Malaysia, General Election 1990* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1991), p. 16; Edmund Terence Gomez, *The 1995 Malaysian General Elections* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996); *The New Straits Times, Results*, December 1, 1999.

**Table II. MALAYSIA. PARLIAMENTARY AND STATE LEGISLATIVE SEATS, 1995-1999
ACCORDING TO POLITICAL PARTY**

	1995		1999				Interim between 1995 and 1999 Elections*	
	Parliament	States	Parliament		States		Parliament	States
			Seats	% win/loss	Seats	% win/loss		
BN (Barisan National)	162	338	148	-8.64	281	-16.86	166	350
UMNO (United Malays National Organization)	89	230	72	-19.1	176	-23.48	93	242
<i>MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association)</i>	30	70	28	-6.67	68	-2.86	30	70
MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress)	7	15	7	0	15	0	7	15
Gerakan (Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia)	7	23	7	0	22	-4.35	7	23
PBB (Partai Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu)	10	-	10	0	-	-	10	-
SUPP (Sarawak United People's Party)	7	-	7	0	-	-	7	-
SNAP (Sarawak National Party)	3	-	4	33.33	-	-	3	-
PBDS (Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak)	5	-	6	20	-	-	5	-
Independent	1	-	1	0	-	-	1	-
Parti Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat (UPKO)	-	-	3	300	-	-	-	-
Parti Maju Sabah (SAPP)	2	-	2	0	-	-	2	-
Parti Liberal Demokratik Sabah (LDP)	1	-	1	0	-	-	1	-

	1995		1999				Interim between 1995 and 1999 Elections*	
	Parliament	States	Parliament		States		Parliament	States
			Seats	% win/loss	Seats	% win/loss		
Opposition	30	56	45	50	113	101.79	26	42
DAP (Democratic Action Party)	9	11	10	11.11	11	0	7	8
PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia)	7	33	27	285.71	98	196.96	8	33
S46 (Semangat 46)	6	12	-	-	-	-	-	-
PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah)	8	-	3	-62.5	-	-	6	-
STAR (Parti Reformasi Negeri)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
KeADILaN	-	-	5	-	4	-	1	-
MDP (Malaysian Democratic Party)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Independent	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-
TOTAL	192	394	193**		394		192	392***

* Based on political developments 1995-1999

** The 193rd Parliamentary Constituency of Mambong, Sarawak, was delineated after the 1995 general elections.

*** The total is less than 394 due to two seats left vacant in Jelawat (Kelantan) and Pasir Tumboh (Kelantan), following the deaths of the assemblymen on 26 February 1999 and 3 September 1999 respectively.

Source: *The New Straits Times, Results*, December 1, 1999, p. 32; *Utusan Malaysia*, 11 November 1999, p. 6.

NOTES

- 1 On this notion, see Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "Malaysia: Quasi Democracy in a Divided Society", in L. Diamond, J. J. Linz, and S. M. Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries*, vol. 3 *Asia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1989).
- 2 Michael Ong, "Malaysia: The Limiting of a Limited Democracy", paper read at the Workshop on "The Political System and Nation-building in ASEAN," Singapore, 23-25 January 1986.
- 3 For a discussion of this "turmoil", see Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "Impact of the Economic Crisis on Malaysian Politics", in *The Financial Crisis in Malaysia: The Economic and Political Consequences, Trends in Southeast Asia*, No. 6 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, October 1999), pp. 13-15. See also John Funston, "Malaysia, A Fateful September", *Southeast Asian Affairs 1999* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), pp. 165-184.
- 4 Anwar is currently in jail for a 6-year sentence for corruption (abuse of power), and is also ongoing trial on a charge of sodomy.
- 5 Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "Evolution and Development of the Political System in Malaysia", in Robert Scalapino, Seizaburo Sato and Jusuf Wanando, eds., *Asian Political Institutionalization* (Berkeley: University of California, Institute of East Asian Studies, 1986), pp. 221-240.
- 6 P. Ramasamy, "A time to balance the scales", *The Sun*, December 3, 1999.
- 7 Bridget Welsh, "Attitudes toward Democracy: Challenges to the Regime?" *Asian Survey*, vol. XXXVI, no. 9 (September 1996), p. 882.
- 8 *Harakah's* circulation to non-members in the open was proscribed soon after the election.
- 9 Media statement by Dr. Syed Husin Ali, President of the Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), posted on the Internet, 13 December 1999.
- 10 Edmund Terence Gomez, *The 1995 Malaysian General Elections* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), p. 44.
- 11 P. Ramasamy, *Op Cit.*
- 12 Such as that done by Welsh, *Op Cit.*

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About the Speaker

Professor Khoo was the first and so far only holder of the Chair of Malaysian History, from 1975-1998, at the University of Malaya. He concurrently held additional senior posts, including Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, 1984-1986. A prolific author, particularly in the area of nineteenth and twentieth century social and political history, he also comments on Malaysia's culture, education, sports, literature and politics in the media and popular journals. He is currently researching Malaysia's foreign policy between 1957-1987, and is a Visiting Research Fellow, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

MALAYSIAN ELECTIONS 1990-1999: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Prelude: the 1980s

Dr. Mahathir's era has been most eventful and he himself has faced more internal challenges than even the country's first Prime Minister (Tunku Abdul Rahman) whom he helped to unseat. Probably the easiest election triumph Dr. Mahathir has experienced in his premiership of slightly over 18 years was in 1982, about a year after he had succeeded Dato' Hussein Onn.

When he faced the polls for the second time in 1986, he had to contend with a split within UMNO owing to the resignation of the Deputy Prime Minister, Musa Hitam. The so-called 2-M administration, as it was popularly called, was supposed to involve a sharing of power between the country's two principal leaders, a situation Dr. Mahathir did not endorse.

This crisis was exacerbated by the arrest in Singapore of Tan Koon Swan (MCA's dynamic President) for criminal breach of trust, leading to a loss of confidence in the MCA among the Chinese. Ethnicity once more surfaced dangerously after having remained almost dormant since 1969. Dr. Mahathir's position was, to an important extent, strengthened by the need for the Malays to re-emphasize their pre-eminent position in Malaysian politics.

UMNO secured 83 of the 84 parliamentary seats it contested in an enlarged 177-seat House of Representatives and 228 out of the 240 state assembly seats. PAS, UMNO's main rival, performed poorly. Only one PAS MP and 15 state assemblymen were returned although they contested 98 parliamentary and 165 state seats. On the other hand, 23 out of the 24 parliamentary seats won by the DAP were in identifiable Chinese majority areas which totaled 33 seats.

The mid-1980s also witnessed the rise of Kadazandusun power as the newly-formed Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) overthrew the Berjaya administration (under the flamboyant Harris Salleh) in the 1985 state election. The new ruling party eventually gained Federal support then joined the Barisan Nasional. In Sarawak, Taib Mahmud consolidated his position after subduing a challenge by the Melanau faction. His position in Sarawak has since been unshakable.

Musa Hitam's attempt to swing the UMNO assembly to his side in 1986 failed as Anwar Ibrahim, leader of the Pemuda (Youth) wing, after Dr. Mahathir had brought him into the party a few years earlier, successfully whipped up fervent support for the Prime Minister.

As Malaysia entered the 1990s, Dr. Mahathir's position remained indomitable; only a heart attack leading to a by-pass operation in early 1989 almost ended his political career. But he returned to face the general election a year later which was to tax his astuteness to the limit.

The 1990 Elections

This was to be the third (the first was in 1959 and the second in 1969) most difficult election faced by the Alliance/Barisan Nasional since 1955. Tengku Razaleigh had mounted a challenge to Dr. Mahathir for leadership of UMNO in 1987, only to be defeated narrowly. He then formed the Semangat '46 (Spirit of '46, the year UMNO was founded to oppose the Malayan Union Constitution) which teamed up with Parti Islam (PAS) to form the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Cohort of United Muslims) or APU. Semangat '46 separately also formed a pact with the DAP, known as the Gagasan Rakyat (People's Concept), and the two coalitions divided up seats for the elections.

On the eve of the elections, the PBS abandoned the Barisan Nasional to join the opposition. Infuriated, Dr. Mahathir immediately made a move to establish UMNO in Sabah. Ghaffar Baba, the Deputy President, was sent to lay the foundation. But he failed to make an impression and Anwar Ibrahim was sent instead. Until he was sacked in late 1998, Anwar enjoyed strong support from the Sabah UMNO.

The cooperation with DAP and PBS was the kiss of death for Tengku Razaleigh's Semangat '46 which, despite being a Malay party, verged on a more

liberal, and therefore a less ethnic, approach towards Malaysian politics. UMNO was able to convince the Malays that Malay hegemony was under threat. Razaleigh's only weapon against Dr. Mahathir was the latter's autocratic leadership style and, to some extent, UMNO's business connections which turned out unconvincing as Tengku Razaleigh himself had been, until he left UMNO, part of the setup.

The results proved to be an anti-climax. Semangat '46 won only 8 of the 61 seats contested. The DAP won a total of 20 seats, four less than in 1986, although it performed credibly in Penang where it secured 11 state seats and Lim Kit Siang dethroned Gerakan's patriarch, Dr. Lim Chong Eu, in the battle for the Padang Kota state seat. But it was insufficient for DAP to wrest control of the Penang State Assembly.

PAS was able to raise its Parliamentary seats from one to seven and, more important still, re-capture Kelantan which it had lost to the Barisan Nasional in 1978. PBS, however, continued to be in firm control of Sabah. Semangat '46 emerged from the election best epitomized by the old Malay saying: *hidup segan, mati tak mahu* (reluctant to live, unwilling to die).

Ironically, although the existence of Gagasan Rakyat was an attempt to present a non-communal front, the tone of the 1990 elections was again clearly ethnic. DAP's "Malaysian Malaysia" and PBS' Christian image enabled UMNO to rally the Malays who gave substantial support to UMNO, and its partners in the BN benefited to some extent.

The 1995 Elections

The period between 1991 and 1997 witnessed a substantial increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Malaysia — most of it was derived from Japan, the US, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea. The total amounted to RM60.8 billion compared with RM36.3 billion between 1984-1990, the previous seven years. The Malaysian government had begun to deregulate by the late 1980s. Previously, foreign ownership of equity in Malaysia, based on the New Economic Policy, had been pegged at 30%. Liberalization brought the desired results.

Although 1993 witnessed a sharp decline in FDI — RM6.2 billion compared with RM17.7 billion in 1992 — the situation improved the following year, FDI

amounting to RM11.3 billion. Overall in the 1990s, the Malaysian economy had achieved unprecedented growth — an average of about 8% up to the time of the currency crisis in the middle of 1997.

Since the early 1990s, there had been massive infra-structural development which included Chinese new villages. Practically all sections of the Malaysian population were in a euphoric mood. Unemployment was a problem of the past; instead, the country had to import large numbers of immigrant workers for the industrial, construction and service sectors.

Malaysia went to the polls in 1995 with ethnicity hardly a worthy issue to highlight unlike in 1990. The BN swept to power with 162 seats in the House of Representatives, out of a total of 192. It retained control of all the state assemblies except Kelantan where PAS, together with Semangat '46, again scored an overwhelming victory. The promise of development failed to impress the Kelantan voters.

In Sabah, a year earlier, although PBS had won narrowly to be able to form the government, almost immediately defections occurred and the BN came into power. With federal support, UMNO's position in the state became increasingly stronger although intra-party friction could not be avoided.

In general, the opposition was in a pathetic state. In Penang, the DAP was left with only one state seat. Whereas Kit Siang had, in 1990, defeated Dr. Lim Chong Eu, he met his Waterloo when he attempted to dislodge Gerakan's Koh Tsu Khoo (the incumbent Chief Minister) at the State level. Karpal Singh, the giant, was also beaten at the State level though both he and Kit Siang retained their Parliamentary seats, with Karpal Singh just pipping the unknown Rhina Barr. Overall, however, the DAP managed to win, again, a total of 20 seats country wide (9 at the Parliament and 11 at the State level).

The future looked gloomy for the DAP and PBS. Even PAS developed self-doubts outside Kelantan. In Sabah, defection was beginning to appear like it was a feature of Kadazandusun politics. In the case of Semangat '46, although it won 6 Parliamentary and 12 State seats in Kelantan, it was, quite clearly, riding on PAS' popularity. Tengku Razaleigh and his lieutenants went through a period of soul

searching. By 1996 he was back in UMNO, together with a portion of his supporters. Semangat '46 was dissolved. It did little to enhance his political credibility.

Elections in the Nineties Compared

The 1999 general elections were more complicated than they have been made out to be by the media in particular. It tended to swallow hook line and sinker the comments of candidates, especially those who had suffered defeats, some of whom attempted to assign blame to exterior factors rather than acknowledge their own inadequacies and shortcomings.

Admittedly, explanations will continue to vary. Still, it can be justifiably argued that UMNO performed dismally in the Peninsula. It lost Terengganu. The last time it happened was 40 years ago. It surrendered a number of seats to PAS in Kedah. It allowed PAS to make significant inroads into Pahang and Melaka practically for the first time. Four ministers and even more deputy ministers lost their seats. And all the ministers were returned with reduced margins, none more conspicuous than Dato' Najib (then the Minister of Education) who won by a mere 241 votes. UMNO's share of Parliamentary seats declined from 89 to 72.

Against that, however, was BN's clean sweep of all the seats in Johor, a phenomenon shared by Negeri Sembilan. In each instance, the majority of the candidates were Malays, and the constituencies Malay-dominated. The Negeri Sembilan scenario is unprecedented. It is all the more interesting because Negeri Sembilan shares a common border with Pahang and Melaka.

Narrow defeats indeed were the order of the day in the "Greater Kuala Lumpur" area where keADILan candidates, in particular, mostly newcomers (among them Chandra Muzaffar), lost very narrowly. One keADILan victory was achieved in the Selangor state seat of Ulu Klang. Anwar Ibrahim's former private secretary, Azmin Mohd. Ali, defeated UMNO stalwart (and former Anwar Ibrahim adherent) Fuad Hassan (the brother of Special Branch officer, Musa Hassan who featured in the earlier Anwar trial). This was in spite of the fact that Azmin's sister, Umami Hafilda Ali, had appeared in many rallies where she spoke against her own brother.

In all keADILan candidates won only a handful of Parliament and State seats in the whole country. Its major success was achieved at Permatang Pau, Anwar

Ibrahim's birthplace, where his wife, Wan Azizah, won the Parliamentary seat and keADILan also picked up a state seat. Considering that the party was formed only about seven months earlier, it is likely that the results have given heartening encouragement to it to sustain its activities. At the same time, it is no doubt aware that it cannot be assumed that a reasonably good performance in one election is a guarantee of a better one the next time around.

On the first day after the results had been announced, the media focused on what it considered a whipping suffered by the DAP whose stalwarts, Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh, both failed to gain any seat in Penang.

Kit Siang himself, even before polling day, appeared to have a change of heart with regard to the DAP's involvement in the "Barisan Alternatif", reminiscent of the "Gagasan Rakyat" of 1990. He felt that cooperating with PAS would probably injure the party's standing in the eyes of the non-Malays. This was a mind-boggling statement as the DAP was not doing it for the first time. It appeared to have been unable to judge the situation based on past experience.

A close scrutiny of the results show that except for Negeri Sembilan where the DAP failed to gain a single seat (it had three State seats in 1995), its performance in 1999 was, in fact, no worse than it was in 1995 when it contested on its own. Tanjong, the Federal Territory and Kota Melaka proved to be once again DAP fortresses.

Both MCA and MIC have no complaints, the latter in particular — it did not lose a single seat in 1999. MCA maintained its strong showing of 1995. In the nineties, MCA has been able to gain the support of not only the Chinese corporate community but also Chinese guilds and associations which the former have been able to penetrate. Working with UMNO has given the MCA supporters considerable advantages in the business world.

The assumption that non-Malay voters gave full support to BN candidates needs qualification. Most of the constituencies where MCA, MIC and Gerakan candidates won had either a small Malay majority or, if not, a sizable number of Malay voters. Had the Malays refrained from voting for non-Malay BN candidates, the results might well have been very different.

It is interesting to note that the Malay vote against UMNO is most evident in the former, so-called "Siamese Malay States" (pre-1909). It is conspicuously pro-UMNO

in the southern part of the Peninsula, including Negeri Sembilan. The centre of the Peninsula is a mixture of the two extremes. No explanation is as yet forthcoming.

The north has been referred to as the Malay heartland. It is so because for over a century now, the Malay population — i.e., originally Malay-speaking — has been most numerous in those states, in particular Kelantan. The Malay population in Perak is almost as large as that of Kelantan but Perak has long had a very substantial non-Malay presence especially in the urban areas because Perak has the most number of relatively large towns compared to all the other Malaysian states.

In 1999, as in 1995, Malay political parties were not preoccupied with ethnic issues. UMNO once more raised the bogey of “Malaysian Malaysia” but found no response. However, the fear of the imposition of Islamic rule should PAS defeat UMNO did affect the non-Malay voters but not to the extent as claimed by the DAP; e.g. the MCA could not dislodge the DAP from the latter’s traditional strongholds. What in fact happened was that the DAP was unable to profit from the cry of “reformasi” which, in the context of Malaysia’s plural society, made more sense to the Malays than the non-Malays because it was sparked off by the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim.

It is a moot point whether the Malays, in 1999, had indeed made a choice between religion and secularism. In a situation where there was a growing sense of disillusionment with the UMNO leadership, primarily because of the Anwar Ibrahim saga, the only alternative for them was PAS which has been around since 1951 and its members, throughout the ‘nineties, if not earlier, had been planting the party’s influence among the Malay grassroots. Compared to PAS, keADILan is a fledgling. Its influence has been focused on the Klang Valley.

Prognosis

The 1999 election results cannot, at this juncture, be used as an indicator to determine in which direction Malay voters are moving. It would be premature to say, for instance, that they have abandoned UMNO. Between 1955 and 1999, PAS’ fortunes have fluctuated more than that of UMNO. In the next few years, PAS will doubtlessly endeavour to build on its present advantage and it will continue to strategize based on its conviction that religion is its real forte.

KeADILan, supported by many NGOs, will attempt to strengthen its urban base and at the same time move into the Malay heartland, though whether PAS will allow keADILan to extend its influence there remains to be seen.

But “Barisan Alternatif”, if it is to continue with its objective of being a party with which all Malaysian voters can identify, will find the struggle an uphill task. The advantage lies with the BN which has already made significant progress towards that goal and has suffered a setback in 1999 mainly because of complacency and a tendency to drift away from the general populace, a defect which it can remedy if it has the political will.

The battle for the hearts and minds of Malaysian voters, including the 680,000 who did not vote in 1999, further augmented by those who will be registering for the next election, will form the dynamics of Malaysian politics in the next five years.

The following text is based on a paper presented
by

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at a Trends in Malaysia Seminar organized by the
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
in Singapore on 3 December 1999.

About the Speaker

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OUTCOME FOR THE BARISAN NASIONAL COALITION

The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) under Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's stewardship, as predicted, emerged victorious from the November 29, 1999 election. Nevertheless, the nature of specific victories and defeats in this contest, representing the 10th referendum in Malaysian election history, requires further analysis and commentary. Among the major factors which influenced election outcomes were the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and a related offshoot of that development, the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. PAS and keADILan (the National Justice Party, formed just months before the election), picked up the UMNO detractors' votes. Malays especially the lower income groups doubt the credibility of the court process involving sodomy charges against Anwar.

Yet, electoral behaviour is equally influenced by the amount of money in one's pocket: here Mahathir emerges as a capable leader. He instituted currency/capital controls to check the downslide following the Asian financial crisis. Malaysians have generally felt little pain over the impact of the crisis on Malaysia's economy. He brought down interest rates from 8-10% pre-June 1997 to 3-4%. He stimulated the economy through boosting exports and increased public spending. Currently, there is an ongoing process of restructuring the banking and financial sectors through mergers (better performing financial institutions are obliged to absorb the losses created by weak ones). In adopting all these measures, he was appealing to Malay ethnicity: that he and the UMNO-led BN are the best protectors of Malay rights and interests; that keADILan is a front for PAS and non-Malay interests.

Mahathir attempted to weaken Anwar's supporters by cutting off all access to business contracts issued through government patronage. Mahathir utilised to good effect

the government's monopoly of power, its generally creditable record of performance, plus strict controls over media, and restrictive laws such as the ISA — all of which he hoped would eventually work to the BN's advantage. The Non-Malays (nearly 50% of the population) generally fear the Islamic emphasis by PAS and Anwar — Mahathir has never been known to push religion. In fact, he has come down harshly on Islamic extremists, as they threaten the pro-Malay secular order, in which even the non-Malays find space and security.

Election outcomes

The BN is a multi-racial coalition of 14 parties in Peninsular Malaysia, and Sabah and Sarawak. As a ruling Coalition, it has tremendous resources to employ using the entire government machinery at its disposal, and ample funds to underwrite the election campaign. Sabah and Sarawak played an important role in securing 42/45 parliamentary seats, with indigenous non-Muslim and Chinese accounting significantly for the impressive BN performance. In Peninsular Malaysia the contribution of BN component parties: MCA, MIC, and Gerakan has been strong in terms of securing the comfortable two-thirds majority in the next parliament. Given the split in Malay votes along pro-Mahathir and pro-Anwar lines, the Chinese and Indian voters have essentially accounted for the swing in favour of the BN in racially mixed constituencies. The BN won by 148/193: more than a comfortable 2/3 majority, but BN's leading partner, UMNO has emerged a weakened party after this election, which raises doubts as to Dr. Mahathir's ability to provide strong and credible leadership for the Malays in particular, and the country in general. Non-Malay votes certainly counted in this election, following the Anwar episode since 2 September 1998, when he was dismissed, and later brutally assaulted by the Police Chief, Rahim Noor, immediately after his arrest on 20 September 1998.

Mahathir seems to have lost a sizeable mandate from the Malay voters as indicated by PAS inroads also into Kedah and Perlis. Many UMNO candidates on the BN ticket won with slim majorities compared to their performance in 1995, as in the case of Najib Tun Razak, the Minister of Education and son of the second prime minister, who won his parliamentary seat of Pekan in Pahang by only 241 votes. In contrast, Najib won by over 10,000 votes in the previous two general elections. Significantly, four UMNO cabinet

ministers lost their seats: Mustapha Mohamad, Second Finance Minister, Megat Junid Megat Ayub, Domestic and Consumer Affairs Minister, Annuar Musa, Rural Development Minister, and Hamid Othman, Minister in Charge of Religious Affairs in the Office of the Prime Minister. Additionally, six deputy ministers lost their seats, including: Tengku Mahmud Mansor, Deputy Agriculture Minister, Idris Jusoh, Deputy Entrepreneur Development Minister, and Abu Bakar Daud, Deputy Science, Technology, and Environment Minister.

BN's telling defeat in Kelantan (41/43), and Terengganu (28/32) in PAS's favour, indicates that the Anwar factor was present. Besides, Chief Minister of the oil-rich state of Terengganu, Wan Mokhtar Ahmad who has held the top post since 1974 was defeated. BN apparently did not inject new blood, whereas PAS began fielding more qualified and committed candidates. Tengku Razaleigh's failure to deliver Kelantan to the BN has reduced his prospects of cabinet appointment in the short term, and perhaps even leadership of UNMO and BN in the long term. BN's setback was also due to the emergence of Barisan Alternative (made up of PAS, DAP, keADILan, and PRM): this opposition coalition strategy enabled a one-on-one contest to minimize vote-splitting, and to reduce the National Front's dominance.

Almost 50% of the simple majority needed to form the government came from BN victories in Sabah: 17/20, and Sarawak: 28/28. For a simple majority the BN needed to win 97 seats, and for a 2/3 majority, it needed to take 129 out of the 193 parliamentary seats. BN clean sweeps for parliament were achieved in six states — Sarawak (28 seats), Johor (20 seats), Selangor (17 seats), Pahang (11 seats), Negeri Sembilan (7 seats), and Perlis (3 seats). The BN recorded convincing victories in: Perak: 20/23 (2 to PAS, and 1 to DAP); Sabah: 17/20 (3 to PBS); and Malacca: 4/5 (1 to DAP). The BN's marginal victories came in Penang: 6/11 (4 to DAP and 1 to keADILan), and Kuala Lumpur: 6/10 (4 to DAP).

However, the BN suffered losses, which were just as visible as its gains, in Kedah: 7/15 (8 to PAS), Kelantan: 1/14 (10 to PAS, 3 to keADILan). The only BN victory was by Tengku Razaleigh in his traditional stronghold of Gua Musang), and Terengganu: 0/8 (7 to PAS, 1 to keADILan). At the state level, PAS has clearly made inroads into former BN strongholds of Perlis, Kedah, Pahang, and Selangor. Thus where Malay/Muslim voters are concerned, UMNO under the BN umbrella has suffered severe setbacks raising

concerns about Malay displeasure at the manner in which former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim was treated by the Mahathir-led government. The final tally indicates a better opposition performance than the last elections in 1995, but the BN still dominated in terms of total votes polled and number of seats secured. BN won 148 seats against the opposition's 45 (PAS 27, DAP 10, KeADILan 5, and PBS 3) and polled 56.5 % of the popular vote.

Implications for the BN

The 1999 Malaysian General Elections indicate that the Malay heartland has been substantially penetrated by Islamic PAS, both at Federal and State levels. This raises the question of Dr. Mahathir's standing among the Malays: it appears he has suffered a substantial loss of support from the Malays. A significant factor in this equation is undoubtedly the arrest and detention of Anwar Ibrahim, on alleged abuse of power and sodomy charges. Of late, there has also been a growing perception among the Malay masses that a small elite within UMNO is exploiting the Bumiputera policy for their own benefit — an issue that was emphasised by both PAS and keADILan. Thus, the manner in which the Anwar issue is finally put to rest can affect UMNO's standing among the Malays in the near future. Malay voters in particular showed that they had no faith at all in the legal process under a secular UMNO leadership, and claim that Anwar would have obtained justice under Islamic law. Their frustrations resulted in a major split-vote among the Malays.

The biggest beneficiary of the Barisan Alternatif was PAS, capitalising on the Anwar factor. The DAP suffered by teaming up with PAS, as Chinese voters were apparently frightened over its zeal to establish an Islamic state.

The government's affirmative action bumiputera policy has clearly benefitted PAS: while the secular UMNO catered to Malay material welfare and socio-economic upliftment, PAS has zeroed in on their religious commitment. In either case, Malay security in the Malaysian context is being advanced, both materially (by the BN), and spiritually (by PAS). A weakened UMNO-led BN must be worrisome to the almost 50% Non-Malay Malaysians. Malay and Non-Malay voters (especially middle-class) who preferred more transparency and accountability in Government, and who were equally disillusioned over the Anwar episode, preferred to vote keADILan for change, and BN for

continued stability. This split in both Malay and Non-Malay middle class votes rebounded in favour of PAS.

In the aftermath of the tenth general elections, Mahathir and his closest UMNO allies would be under increasing pressure to account for the rather dismal performance of a party that has claimed to be the sole custodian of Malay rights and champion of Malay/Malaysian sovereignty against domestic as well as foreign pressures. Dr. Mahathir's 19-year stewardship of the country has seen him through five electoral referendums: 1982, 1986, 1990, 1995, and 1999 — a remarkable feat for an Asian country attempting to maintain a semblance of democracy in the midst of multiple pressures of modernisation and development. Indeed, the election results would have been significantly different, and in favour of the UMNO-led BN absent the Anwar factor. The Malay polity as well as Malay/Muslim politics need quickly to come to terms with this issue, and resolve it in a manner that does not further erode the credibility of Mahathir's remaining few years as effective leader of a stable, prosperous and secure multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-cultural nation.

Finally, there is the prospect of religious polarisation in Peninsular Malaysia, with a PAS-oriented Islamic approach in the north, and a UMNO-oriented Islamic view in the South. The shape of this new trend also depends greatly on what an UMNO-led BN does to redress Malay political alienation. For the future, the BN Government faces a dilemma: if it over-addresses Islamic issues, it could alienate secular-leaning Malays and of course, the Non-Malays as well. If it attempts to reward the Non-Malays for their decisive support of the BN in this election, it runs the risk of alienating Malays/Muslims. Unless the present ethnic paradigm is changed, and it appears unlikely given entrenched interests, it is not only Mahathir's Dilemma, but also Malaysia's Dilemma in the New Millenium.

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by

Dr Hari Singh

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in Singapore on 3 December 1999.

About the Speaker

Dr Hari Singh specialises in Southeast Asian international relations and domestic politics in Malaysia, and has published widely in both areas. At the time he presented this paper he was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the National University of Singapore. He is attached to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore as a Visiting Research Fellow between January and March 2000, and will undertake a detailed assessment of the 1999 Malaysian General Election. He will then take up an appointment as Associate Professor with the Strategic and Security Studies Centre at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

OPPOSITION POLITICS AND THE 1999 MALAYSIAN ELECTION

The 1999 general election represents a watershed in Malaysian politics. For the first time, the leading opposition parties, namely, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), and Parti KeADILan Nasional (keADILan) joined forces to issue a common election manifesto under the banner of the Barisan Alternatif (BA). Unlike the often hastily patched and intra-opposition bickering that followed the “electoral pacts” in the past, the opposition demonstrated a remarkable degree of cooperation and resilience in mapping out a united electoral strategy aimed at denying the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Virtually every constituency registered straight fights between the BN and the opposition, thereby avoiding the splitting of votes that have traditionally benefited the BN. Moreover, a member from one component party was allowed to stand as a candidate for another within the BA framework. Truly, this was an unprecedented development in Malaysia’s electoral politics.

Past Failures of the United Front Strategy

To understand the evolution of the BA as a credible alternative to the ruling BN, it is important to analyze, however briefly, the socio-political and economic transformation of Malaysian society. To begin with, the instrumental worth of “Malay unity”, which the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the backbone of the BN, had so skilfully manipulated to secure majority Malay support, had declined. The idea of ethnic allegiance made sense under conditions of communal threat. In the aftermath of riots in May 1969 Malay political power was entrenched, including through constitutional amendments in 1971. Malay economic imbalance was to some extent

alleviated with the introduction at the same time of the New Economic Policy. Finally, the steady decline of the Chinese as a sizeable minority, from 37% of the total population in 1957 to 26% in 1999, also allayed Malay threat perceptions. Consequently, “Malay unity” as a clarion call for blind support for the ruling regime began to loosen.

The ethnic transformation coincided with other political developments in Malaysian politics. Perhaps the most significant was the split in UMNO following intense factional infighting, and the launch of Semangat 46 in 1988 as the “other” UMNO. “Mainstream Malays” were divided. The conflict in UMNO also spilled over into the wider political environment which resulted in increasing authoritarianism of the Mahathir administration, manifested in greater centralization of power within UMNO and the government, actions against the judiciary, repression of the opposition, and an increasing trend towards corrupt practices and abuse of power.

An electoral pact based on two coalitions headed by Semangat 46 contested against the BN in the 1990 elections, but expectations did not match outcomes. The BN retained its two-thirds majority. However the opposition made marginal gains in seats, and PAS-Semangat 46 won government in the state of Kelantan. What is more interesting, however, is the fact that the margin of electoral votes in securing parliamentary and state seats for the BN had declined compared to past elections.

Why then did this challenge to the BN fail? This question is relevant in assessing the performance of the BA in the 1999 polls. The main reason for failure was that the opposition forces were unable to bridge the ideological chasm which separated them, demonstrated by the need for two coalitions. The DAP’s “Malaysian Malaysia”, seen as implying equal political rights for all citizens, alienated Malay support, and the party remained opposed to the creation of an Islamic state in Malaysia as advocated by PAS. Semangat 46 was less than an effective bridging device. It was bereft of a concrete ideology, and seen as an UMNO offshoot opportunistically aligning itself with the opposition.

Rise of The Barisan Alternatif

Although the “mainstream Malays” were divided, they were nevertheless mindful that their well being was beholden to the Malaysian state. Since any distinction between the

state and governing party was dimly perceived, most Malays continued to owe loyalty to UMNO.

Developments in the 1990s had an erosive impact on this political allegiance. During a period of economic downturn, resources shrank, affecting particularly the Malay middle class dependent on the state for their material well being. The patron-client network among the Malay masses and UMNO came under strain, exacerbating rivalries within the party. Thus, it was not simply a question of “money politics” within UMNO, which had traditionally been tolerated as part of politics. The ordinary Malay now began to compare his lot with the palatial residences and executive jets owned by the *UMNOputras*. The perception that emerged was that no longer were the Malays being “robbed” by the Chinese, but by the UMNO elites. The majority of Malays now viewed “corporatization”, “privatization”, and “industrialization” as state-legitimization of corruption, cronyism and nepotism. This aspect became more salient following the revelation of business deals by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who also emerged as the rallying point as well as the ideological bridge among the opposition.

Mahathir removed Anwar as Deputy Prime Minister and had him expelled from UMNO in September 1998 on the grounds of immoral behaviour. Anwar was then detained under ISA, before being tried in court and sentenced to six years imprisonment on charges of corruption (abuse of power). In the eyes of many, Anwar’s purge was politically motivated, revealing the insecurity of the incumbent Prime Minister. The event resulted in a very serious fracture within UMNO between his supporters and detractors. But what distinguishes this development from the party schism that developed in 1987 was that it was no longer simply an intra-elite competition. The way in which Anwar was treated, especially his humiliation in public, alienated a significant segment of the Malays, whose political culture explicitly admonished Rulers against shaming their subjects. Others were put off by the manner in which institutions such as the police and courts were used against reformasi supporters, and in mounting legal action against Anwar.

The Anwar episode helped pave the way for the crystallization of a united opposition front to the present government. To some extent, Anwar’s personality and the policies which he implemented while in governmental authority, had an important bearing on the opposition front. As a student activist, and later as the leader of the

Islamic youth movement, the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), Anwar had developed his populist credentials and was regarded as one of the harshest critics of the government. During his tenure as Finance Minister, Anwar had taken a particular interest in the poor and lower middle class Malays, and prior to his downfall had begun to speak critically of corruption, cronyism and nepotism within the government.

Anwar's philosophical beliefs coincided with the general ideological platform of the opposition parties. The BA nominated him as leader, helping it emerge as a credible opposition organized around a Malay core. For the first time in Malaysian history, the opposition issued a common election manifesto and pooled common resources. The DAP, which had traditionally garnered about 20% of the popular vote, agreed to downplay its controversial "Malaysian Malaysia" proposal, while PAS, with electoral support around 15% of the popular vote, diluted its intention of establishing an Islamic state.

To some extent, external events helped the BA. The demise of the Cold War reinforced the process towards global democratization. Western nations became less tolerant of repressive non-communist regimes. The changing international environment and underlying tensions within domestic societies combined to unleash forces clamouring for greater political liberalization, resulting in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes among Malaysia's neighbours. These developments gave heart to the pro-democratic forces in Malaysia, bringing together the opposition parties, non-governmental organizations, and activists. However the government were in some instances able to turn this to their advantage by accusing reformasi of aligning with forces out to re-colonise Malaysia — most notably when US President Gore spoke up on the movement's behalf.

Assessing the Barisan Alternatif's Performance

At first glance, it would seem that the BA did not fare too well in the 1999 general election. The BN retained its two-thirds parliamentary majority. The BA only managed to sweep 42 seats (PAS – 27, DAP – 10, keADILan – 5). In terms of popular vote, the BN secured 56.5%). However, a more respectful picture emerges if the BA is analyzed through redeeming eyes.

First, the BA did not deny the ruling BN a two-thirds parliamentary majority, but it was able to reduce the BN's parliamentary majority from 166 to 148. Secondly, not only did the BN fail to wrest the state of Kelantan from PAS, but it also lost Terengganu. The BA also gained more parliamentary seats than the BN in Kedah. Thirdly, except for Sabah, Sarawak and Johor, the BN won most of its seats with significantly reduced majorities. It is open to speculation what impact 680,000 voters registered earlier in the year but not entered on the electoral rolls, mainly representing anti-establishment views, would have had on the electoral outcome. Fourthly, the BN suffered important ministerial casualties. Finally, keADILan, an embryonic multiracial party, performed exceptionally well given the circumstances.

Clearly, there was a definite change in ground level sentiment towards the BN. UMNO, in particular, had become alienated from the Malays. The BN managed to win, because of Chinese support, which was at the expense of the DAP. The Chinese were concerned about PAS' Islamic state and also feared violence on the scale of May 1969.

CONCLUSION

The most significant aspect of the 1999 general election is that the major opposition parties, despite their divergent ideologies, could come together on common grounds and present a credible challenge to the ruling BN. In this respect, the changing socio-political climate and economic climate in Malaysia as well as the Anwar saga helped the opposition to bridge the ideological gulf.

This election also showed that the Malays were more amenable towards the idea of an alternative government. In this regard, they were less parochial than before. While most BA voters supported PAS, a significant minority voted for the DAP, which tended to offset the desertion of the party by the Chinese. Such a development has positive implications for the DAP. Although the party has projected itself as a multiracial organization, its support was mainly from the Chinese. The recent polls have corrected such a perception.

The trend towards a multi-racial approach to politics is best illustrated by keADILan. In the past, multiracial parties have fared badly at the polls. Yet, it must be

repeated here, keADILan's performance is unprecedented. Likewise, PAS also managed to secure some non-Malay support because of an exemplary clean, efficient and non-discriminatory government in Kelantan. Thus, while the BN remains a conglomerate of communal-based parties, the BA has emerged as a multiracial front.

How the BA fares in the future would depend a great deal on the state government of Terengganu. If Terengganu can emulate the example of Kelantan, the influence of PAS would further increase among the Chinese, not to mention the Malays.

The performance of the BA has wider implications for the Malaysian political system. First, it appears that ethnicity is a receding factor in determining electoral outcomes, especially in the majority Malay constituencies. Secondly, and for the first time in Malaysian history, the parliamentary opposition is Malay-based. This could help institutionalize the idea of checks and balances in a democratic framework, and also makes it more difficult for the ruling regime to opt for repressive policies. Thirdly, the BA may have unwittingly created a dilemma for Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's tenure as Prime Minister. BN's dependence on the non-Malay vote has implications for Mahathir's legitimacy as the leader of the Malays, and may spawn a new round of power struggle within UMNO.

Still, predicting the future of the BA must be tempered with a tinge of pessimism. It is not clear whether keADILan represents opposition to the BN or opposition to Dr. Mahathir's leadership of UMNO. If it turns out to be the latter, especially if a power vacuum develops within UMNO which may facilitate Anwar's return to UMNO, the BA will essentially be reduced to PAS and the DAP. In the immediate-term, at least, there is a continuing need for a third party to bridge the ideological divide between these two parties.

The following text is based on a paper presented

by

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at a Roundtable on the Malaysian Elections organized by the

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in Singapore on 10 December 1999.

About the Speaker

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ISSUES AND STRATEGIES OF THE BARISAN ALTERNATIF

The 1999 Malaysian general election proved the incumbent Barisan Nasional's (BN) biggest challenge yet. For the first time, all the major peninsular opposition parties were united, and not just at the level of an electoral pact. This Barisan Alternatif (BA) included Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Parti keADILan Nasional (keADILan), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), and received the support of a wide range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and independent activists. The BA had a unified platform of multi-racialism, social justice, and more equitable development, as well as a cooperative strategy. Moreover, a rise in support for political Islam drew flocks of voters to PAS and the BA, even though the coalition's common manifesto, "Towards a Just Malaysia", made no mention of an Islamic state.

The BA helped PAS more than any other party, though all member parties benefited. The most visible indicator of BA success was PAS's retention of Kelantan, and recapturing of Terengannu (previously held 1959-61). However, these are the states in which PAS has always been strong. What is probably more significant in terms of the BA's potency and prospects is its national presence. For instance, keADILan captured seats in far more states than east coast-bound Parti Semangat '46 did in 1990 or 1995. Significant, too, was that all BA parties whittled down the BN's hefty majorities in urban, middle class constituencies, especially in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur — especially since some of the most impressive such gains were posted by neophyte politicians, such as social activists Chandra Muzaffar and Irene Fernandez. The DAP, in addition, gained one more seat than it had in 1995.

Fears of instability or Islamic extremism, coupled with persistent communalism and the BN's economic promises, did erode support for the BA. However, the BA's gains represent a combination of voters' confidence in the coalition and support for its

issue-oriented, *keadilan* (justice) platform, support for more Islamic governance under PAS, and widespread dissatisfaction with the BN. This rejection of the BN was due largely to unhappiness with the harsh treatment accorded Anwar Ibrahim by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, his former mentor, as well as to the perceived perversion of pro-Malay affirmative action policies for the principle benefit of just a small, multi-racial and well-connected elite. What is more, even many voters who ultimately chose the BN were not really content with the party's leadership, so while Mahathir seems intent to "die with his boots on", his position at the helm of UMNO and the BN is less secure than previously.

While fear of the unknown dissuaded many from choosing the BA, untold numbers of BA supporters were unable to vote, either because they are still too young, or because they had never before felt sufficiently motivated to register. Among the latter category were some of the 680,000 in the April-May 1999 registration exercise that the Elections Commission could not process in time for inclusion in the 1999 electoral rolls. The BN's votes were also supplemented by phantom voters — foreign or outside voters who vote using the identity card number of a deceased or unregistered voter — and by postal votes. These tipped the scales in at least a couple BN victories, even though PAS reputedly captured seventy percent of postal votes.

The substance and relative success of the BA can be traced to the *reformasi* movement, begun by ex-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim upon his sacking in September 1998, as well as to residual frustration with the BN's handling of the economic crisis since mid-1997, particularly evidence of cronyism, corruption, and nepotism in government. With *reformasi* strongest in the Klang Valley, that is where the non-Islamic opposition did best. Also, while the BA included no formal role for NGOs, these groups still participated, cooperating closely with opposition parties whether as candidates and campaign workers or as election monitors (especially in the 42-member NGO Malaysian Citizens' Election Watch), as they had since the outset of *reformasi*. The legacy of *reformasi* was also evident in the media, both in the BA's heavy reliance on the Internet and alternative print media such as PAS newspaper *Harakah*, and in the BN's rhetoric and imagery — most apparent in its brash advertisements — of the opposition as hoodlums, rioters and theocrats.

Issues, NGOs and tactics

Even though the BA leadership affirmed the coalition's commitment to preserving the constitution, including the Malay special position in the economy and politics, the BA was not merely a replica of the BN. Rather, while the BN ran on a platform of stability and economic development, the BA centered its campaign around human rights, including freedom of speech, press and assembly; social justice and equity; and clean, transparent, democratic government. The BA did debate economic issues, presenting a proposed budget and critiquing the government's bank merger and privatization plans, but focused more on redistributive policies and eradicating economically-inefficient corrupt practices than on growth. For instance, targeting lower-income voters, the BA promised a monthly wage for plantation workers, more merit-based affirmative action programs, and individual rather than company-held taxi licenses. The BA also discussed ways of bridging racial divisions, from having multilingual *ceramahs* (political fora) to denying any racialism within the component parties. This "one nation" message was both ideological and tactical, as voters had to be disabused of their fears of electing candidates of other races.

Women's issues also featured prominently in the BA campaign, partly in response to the BN's admonitions to Muslim women that PAS would curtail their rights; partly given the high profile of women such as Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, President of keADILan; and partly due to the impact of the Women's Agenda for Change (WAC) and Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI). The WAC, a document endorsed by a range of NGOs and political parties, enumerated action steps to be taken to rectify gender imbalances and biases. The WCI was an initiative aimed at educating women about why and how to be more politically engaged as well as running a "women's candidate" — NGO activist Zaitun Kassim — in the elections. Zaitun, who ran in Selangor as an Independent but under the banner of the DAP, received favorable attention in most mainstream media (unlike virtually all other opposition candidates) and polled a remarkable 26,000 votes, substantially shrinking her BN opponent's majority.

Zaitun was not the only social activist moved by *reformasi* and related events to shift from the NGO sphere to direct political engagement. Activists for human rights, social justice and related issues, including Sivarasah Rasiah and Tian Chua (both from

Suaram), Irene Fernandez (Tenaganita), Chandra Muzaffar (International Movement for a Just World), Zainur Zakariah (Bar Council), Jeyakumar Devaraj (workers' advocate), and Fan Yew Teng (Cenpeace), also joined parties if they had not done so before and ran for office. All these candidates lost, though often by very narrow margins. Likewise, controversial novelist Shahnnon Ahmad, author of the scatological political satire *Shit*, also stood and won, and a number of candidates from Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) and other Islamic organizations also contested, many of them successfully. At the same time, several long-time opposition party members, such as the DAP's Teresa Kok and PRM President Syed Husin Ali, played upon the new-found popularity of social issues, stressing their activist identities. Meanwhile, many BA campaigns relied upon the participation of NGO activists, both from secular human rights or community development groups such as Suara Rakyat Malaysia, the All Women's Action Society, and Pusat Komunikasi Masyarakat, and from ABIM, Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM), and other Islamic groups. A number of Malay and non-Malay university students also worked on opposition campaigns and respected academics and professionals, some also NGO activists, participated in BA *ceramahs*, including economist Jomo K.S., sociologist Kua Kia Soong, and lawyer Chandra Kanagasabai.

The BA slung its share of mud, too, though without access to the mainstream media its attacks had far less reach and impact than those of the BN. For instance, an obviously false friendly letter from Mahathir to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak made the rounds of the Internet and BA *ceramahs*, along with allegations of womanizing among UMNO members and even photos of Mahathir's wife being kissed on the cheek by another man, presented in Internet fora as inappropriate for a Muslim woman. Also, despite their attacks on the BN's use of advertisements, the BA did its best to do the same, though only managing to get two advertisements accepted by the *Star* and others in Chinese newspapers. However, the BA's advertisements, unlike those of the BN, were more constructive than derogatory, for instance urging voters to "Make Malaysia decent again" by voting with their conscience."¹ For the most part, though, the BA relied just upon *ceramahs* and the Internet (especially websites and list-servers such as Laman Reformasi, freeMalaysia, Sang Kancil, Adil-net, and malaysiakini) to communicate alternative news and its message.

Effectiveness of issues-based campaign?

In the absence of reliable surveys, it is impossible to determine the real effectiveness of the BA's social issues-based campaign among the different racial communities, especially given the BN's race-baiting fear campaign and the fact that so many *reformasi* supporters were not allowed to vote. However attractive its appeals, the BA fought an uphill battle. Mahathir's BN took full advantage of the "three Ms" — money, media, and government machinery — and showed no mercy to the BA. In a series of full- and half-page advertisements throughout the campaign period, the BN characterized the BA as inexperienced, untrustworthy, not united, reliant upon foreign aid, and riot-prone. The BN further worried Chinese voters about Islamization by claiming that "a vote for the DAP is a vote for PAS", while disturbing Malay voters by highlighting PAS President Nik Aziz's Nik Mat's statement that PAS had nothing against an ethnic Chinese Prime Minister, and highlighting cooperation between the DAP and Israeli parties in the Socialist International. The government-controlled mass media also raised concerns about keADILan's chances by reporting a string of defections by party members to UMNO, despite keADILan's protestations that many of them were never members. Risqué videos of Anwar and a fake issue of *Harakah* further stoked trepidation regarding the BA.

Nonetheless, the success of candidates such as the wife of twice-jailed DAP politician Lim Guan Eng, Betty Chew, as well as the strong showing of so many NGO candidates, suggests that "justice" concerns were significant. On the other hand, the fact that the opposition did so poorly in Sarawak and Sabah amid BN rhetoric about the higher growth rates to be achieved under BN than opposition rule, indicates that the BN's economic promises (reinforced by heavy spending during the campaign and a media blitz) can sway non-Malays and non-Muslim *bumiputera* in particular.

It may have been Islam as much as the secular *keadilan* theme and Anwar's appeal that won a large number of Malay votes. Many PAS supporters were no doubt drawn to the party given its track record of clean, responsive government, as well as opposition to UMNO, rather than in the quest for theocratic rule — so for instance, the reason the BA did so poorly in Johor may be just that UMNO but not Anwar is strong there. However, given the Islamic revival since the 1970s and the obvious resonance of a specifically Islamic platform with large numbers of Malay voters, many voters clearly

do support PAS's Islamicization agenda, however muted it may have been in the context of the BA. Without alienating too many of these supporters, PAS highlighted its fair treatment of non-Muslims in Kelantan and stressed that Islam is race-blind, even if the vast majority of Malaysian Muslims are Malay. Since the elections, though, PAS has tentatively moved ahead with its Islamist agenda in Terengganu, banning gambling and restricting the sale of alcohol, and discussing implementation of a *kharaj* tax (quit-rent tax for non-Muslims). On the other hand, PAS has fulfilled more encompassing campaign promises, for instance ending the collection of road tolls (a *reformasi* demand particularly salient among non-Malays) and enforcing a five-day work week.

What the future holds in store for the BA is uncertain. It will undoubtedly continue to highlight non-racial social issues, with Islam also playing a key role. However, so long as politics is racialized, meaning that a gain for Malays is perceived as a loss for Chinese and vice versa, the BN's communal formula will be tough to overcome. PAS and the DAP have indicated that they want still to work together, each making some concessions (PAS by decelerating its Islamist agenda, and the DAP by sacrificing some non-Malay votes since so many of these voters are afraid of PAS and its programmes), so the BA may cohere. KeADILan probably will not dissolve, either, since the party has won at least some seats and Malay, especially middle class voters do seem receptive to the idea of a secular alternative to UMNO.

If it is to contest in the next elections, the BA will probably need to develop a more unified presence by, for example, adopting a common emblem or registering as a body. Also, the BA will need to prove to voters over the next five years that the DAP and PAS really are compatible and that the BA is not just by and for Malays — this time around, the coalition was clearly dominated by PAS and keADILan. As a result, the DAP was often left sidelined and defensive and DAP supporters were reluctant to lend much active support to PAS, even when Malays from PAS campaigned for the DAP.

NOTES

- 1 *Star*, 28 November 1999, p. 57.

The following text is based on a paper presented

by

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at a Roundtable on the Malaysian Elections organized by the

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About the Speaker

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Malaysia's Election: Malay Winds of Change?

Debate over the nature of recent political events in Malaysia attracts sharply contrasting views. On one side are those arguing that the *reformasi* movement, and anti government opposition since the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, reflect a notable shift in political culture — towards more democratic, transparent and accountable government. Ranged against them are analysts who see current developments as essentially a replay of older themes. By this latter account, *reformasi* is similar to the split in UMNO in the late 1980s — when Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah established Semangat '46, then worked together with the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) — and doomed to meet the same end.

Several recent works suggest that both these accounts miss the main point. In an election analysis titled “Islamic Winds of Change”, writer and lawyer, Karim Raslan, argues that the main conflict is between secularisation, represented by Dr Mahathir and UMNO, and Islamisation represented by PAS. The usual focus on conflict between Prime Minister Mahathir and Anwar “ignores a far deeper and more important societal shift — the increasing Islamisation of the country’s majority Malay Muslim population”.¹ Numerous foreign journalists have also been quick to identify Islamic extremism as the new danger facing Malaysia, following gains made by the “fundamentalist” PAS.

The following analysis focuses on what the elections tell us about these large issues. Did *reformasi* show it was a force to be reckoned with? And how important was Islamisation?

Background

The election followed fifteen dramatic months in Malaysian politics. The public — particularly the Malay public — was divided over the actions taken against Anwar: his sacking from office and UMNO, bashing by the head of police, and sensational sexual allegations and court cases. Tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands demonstrated against the government — often in defiance of the police firing tear gas and chemically laced water. Police reports, affidavits, and mega-dollar lawsuits became a normal part of political life. The Internet suddenly emerged as a new political weapon, wielded particularly by the *reformasi* side. Dr Mahathir came under unprecedented personal attack, being dubbed a host of unflattering names including the Great Pharaoh (Mahafiraun) and the Great Oppressor (Mahazalim).

In this atmosphere PAS, the National Justice Party (keADILan) set up by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah in April 1999, the small, socialist, Party Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), and the predominantly Chinese DAP, organised the first united front of all major opposition parties. Many differences divided them, but the Barisan Alternatif (BA) did work closely together and began to articulate a detailed agenda for change.

Winners and losers

With 148 seats in the 193 House, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) easily secured the coveted 2/3 majority. Dr Mahathir immediately declared it a better result than 1995, claiming BN then won 132 before defections lifted it to 162. This analysis, duly reported in the local and international media was, however, wrong. The BN had won 162 seats in 1995, and later increased this to 166. Still, even though BN seats declined, and percentage of overall vote went from 65.1 to 56.5, the coalition gained 77% of parliamentary seats in a very strong performance.

These overall figures do, however, mask three important features. First, BN support was particularly concentrated in Sabah, Sarawak and southern peninsular states such as Johor. The three states account for one third of total seats, and BN won 64 of 67. Secondly, non-Malays rallied behind the BN more than had been anticipated. This has been overstated in some accounts. The BN's Malaysian Chinese Association lost two seats, while the opposition DAP's vote did improve slightly over 1995. Chinese in the Federal Territory/Selangor region voted strongly for the BA, enabling PAS to win a

state seat in Kajang (Selangor) where 54% of the electorate was Chinese. But in several seats — around 15 by some estimates — Chinese votes for BN held firm or increased, preventing a BA win.

The third and most important factor obscured by overall figures is that the result was the worst electoral setback UMNO has ever experienced:

- its parliamentary seats declined from 94 (89 elected 1995, others gained later by defections) to 72. For the first time ever its seats were less than the total of its coalition partners
- 4 of its ministers and 5 deputy ministers were defeated. Many others experienced a massive reduction in their majorities
- PAS retained power in Kelantan and won in Terengganu for the first time since 1959, with massive majorities in each state (41 of 43, and 28 of 32, respectively). PAS and the BA also improved opposition performances in Perlis, Kedah, Penang, Perak, Selangor, Federal Territory and Pahang, and
- perhaps half the Malay vote went to the opposition.

Leading Malay politicians and commentators reacted as if UMNO had lost. Senior party figures such as Foreign Minister Syed Hamid and Dato' Najib, and *New Straits Times* Editor Kadir Jasin all spoke of setbacks to UMNO. Razak Baginda, of the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre, quickly observed that "UMNO has been licked." Later he commented: "UMNO is shell-shocked at the moment. It has lost the trust and confidence of the Malays. It needs a total reformation and perhaps even restructuring".²

The BA won 42 seats, and with three more won by the Parti Bersatu Sabah increased opposition parliamentary representation by 50%. The biggest gains were made by PAS, with 27 seats (double its previous best performance) alongside its victories in Kelantan and Terengganu.

In the eyes of many analysts, keADILan was a loser. Karim Ruslan argues that its performance was not even as impressive as Semangat '46 in 1990. (Semangat gained 15.1% of the votes, and 8 seats, against keADILan's 11.7% and 5 seats.) "Reformasi seems dead", declared William Case, from Australia's Griffith University.³

KeADILan's five parliamentary and 4 state seats (plus one or two more contested under the PAS banner) were not a large reward for its overall vote, but it missed several parliamentary seats around the Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory and Selangor state by very narrow margins, and picked up state seats in Selangor, Perak, Pahang and Penang. Anwar's wife also polled a strong 9,077 majority in Permatang Pauh, Anwar's former constituency. KeADILan's support was far more widely dispersed than Semangat, which gained few votes outside Kelantan. Furthermore keADILan had only eight months to organise, where Semangat had two years. On this basis, the party deserves to be included in the winners rather than losers.

Why a BN victory?

The BN does, of course, go into elections with enormous advantages from the 3Ms — machinery (party and state), media and money. Tengku Razaleigh, former Semangat leader who contested this election as head of UMNO in Kelantan, commented on some aspects in a pre-election interview:⁴

UMNO may be split, and Barisan may appear weak. But it is [actually] strong because it is backed by the government machinery...The police and other agencies are with the government, whether you like it or not. The arm of the government reaches out right to the grassroots. It's everywhere, ever-present. It's formidable. "You want water? We'll give you water." If the road needs mending, we get mended within the week. Barisan has the money, the organisation and the bodies. I know because I was in the opposition.

BN control over the mass media has also often been noted. Television and radio are owned by the government or BN-linked companies, and all the mainstream newspapers are owned by BN-linked companies. These were used unapologetically to promote BN policies and condemn the opposition. Even the few minutes air time traditionally made available to the opposition to outline policies on public radio was withdrawn this time.

BN was helped in this election by timing, non-Malay fears, and political differences in the East Malaysian states and Johor.

The timing of elections was not perfect — it was the first time parliament had to be dissolved mid session, when important school exams were in progress, during the wet season, and just before the Islamic fasting month — but was nonetheless highly

favourable. The economy had to a large extent recovered from the depths of decline in 1998. As usual, various incentives were given or promised just before the elections — including bonuses to public servants, increased salaries for teachers, more spending on infrastructure projects, more schools for both Malays and non-Malays. Non-Malay concern over bank merger proposals announced in August had eased following substantial modification. The BA momentum had also been blunted by two developments: medical evidence that Anwar was not in imminent danger from arsenic poisoning, as had been alleged; and a Statutory Declaration by a former senior Bank Negara official, Datuk Abdul Murad Khalid, making various allegations of corruption against Anwar, including a RM3 billion slush fund. Neither of these matters was straightforward — the medical evidence did in fact confirm very high levels of arsenic at an earlier stage, and Murad's allegations were widely challenged — but the pro-government media went into overdrive to present these only in a light favourable to BN interests. Finally, elections were held just before 680,000 newly registered voters — a large majority likely to support the BA — became eligible to vote.

The BN successfully capitalised on non-Malay fears. Government leaders warned that if a 2/3 majority were not attained a repeat of the 13 May 1969 racial killings was possible. An advertising blitz on TV and in newspapers depicted the BA as rioters and predicted conflict if they were supported. And a vote for DAP was equated with a vote for an Islamic state, because of DAP's alliance with PAS. Attempts to frighten Malays — by claiming that a vote for the BA was a vote for the Chinese chauvanist DAP, and an end to the Malay special position and Malay dominance (*ketuanan Melayu*) — did not have similar success.

State peculiarities also played a part in the BN success. The Anwar issue had limited resonance in Sabah and Sarawak. State issues had much greater impact. In Johor, UMNO has traditionally been more united and stronger than other states. Support there still declined by 7%, only slightly less than average, but this was not enough to lose any seats.

More queries than usual were raised about whether the elections were free and fair. Computerisation helped reveal anomalies that might otherwise have gone unnoticed — such as thousands of electors, including in Dr Mahathir's constituency, all

with more or less consecutive ID numbers. At this stage it is difficult to be sure whether such matters might have helped the BN in critical electorates.

Strong PAS-keADILan showing

At the beginning of the campaign Dr Mahathir rejected attempts to categorise the election as a popularity contest between him and Anwar. It is impossible *not* to categorise it at least partly in these terms. This was the first opportunity for most Malaysians to register their feelings on this issue, and the BN made it a focal point of its campaign. In the advertising blitz Anwar was blamed for 'riots', and his wife was portrayed allegedly saying she did not trust him. A videotape containing 'confessions' to the police by Anwar's alleged homosexual partners (all since retracted) was distributed widely in Kuala Lumpur. The day before elections newspapers carried allegations of Anwar as a wife-beater, endorsed by Dr Mahathir, and showed pictures of him disco dancing (dismissed as fake by the BA). At no stage did Dr Mahathir ease up on public criticisms of Anwar. (Anwar was of course deprived of a platform to defend his position, when the judge in his court case was suddenly taken ill on the day elections were announced.)

Post election assessments by both the BA and UMNO leaders generally agreed that BA successes were largely because of the 'Anwar factor'. The swing against the government was highest in areas where the issue was most keenly felt, registering some 22% around the Federal Territory and Selangor. Dato' Najib said that UMNO had been unable to counter allegations of cruelty (kezaliman) against Anwar, and noted that the last thing voters saw before entering the voting booth was a poster of Anwar and his black eye. Wanita UMNO leaders spoke of women in Kelantan carrying similar posters and crying. Dr Mahathir in various statements said many Malays were 'misled' by Anwar and opposition lies, but also attributed UMNO losses to conflicts over election candidates, caused by Anwar's success in cultivating personal loyalty.

It is no surprise that PAS gained as much or more than others in the BA from the Anwar factor. As a long-established Malay party it was best placed to capitalise, and before keADILan was even established membership had swollen by over 100,000. The new members included many Malay professionals, some of whom stood in the elections.

Because of the ‘Anwar factor’ the opposition was able to organise a much more intensive campaign on the ground than previously. They drew on vast numbers of idealistic youth, who were paid nothing for their services, and indeed often had to contribute. They made extensive use of the Internet, audio and videocassettes and even VCDs. These certainly had an important role. Many of the top UMNO leaders targeted on the Internet lost their seats or gained a much reduced majority — those defeated including ministers Megat Junid and Hamid Othman, and deputy minister Ibrahim Ali. The PAS twice-weekly *Harakah*, which increased circulation from around 65,000 to some 300,000 immediately after Anwar’s sacking, became the main newspaper for opposition views — and in many cases was more widely believed than the mainstream press.

What part did Islam and Islamisation play in this? Karim Ruslan is of course correct in noting that Islamisation has been growing over recent decades, beginning in the late 1960s. Anwar was one of the key players from the outset as head of the Islamic Students Federation, then the Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM). He later played a major role on Islamic issues within UMNO, softening the sharp comments and judgements often made by Dr Mahathir. With his exit the ‘UMNO ulamak’ were unable to compete. All were defeated in the elections, though Hamid Othman was re-appointed minister in charge of Islamic affairs in the Office of the Prime Minister, after nomination to the Senate.

An Islamic debate has been at the heart to the Anwar issue since the outset. A very large number of Muslims believe that Anwar should be tried under Islamic law. Dr Mahathir also defined the issue in Islamic terms in his first major statement after Anwar’s arrest, saying “I am a better Muslim than he is”.⁵ Both sides have accused the other of ‘fitnah’ (lies), a serious offence under Islamic law.

Islamic issues were raised during the electoral campaign, mainly in a bid by the BN to frighten non-Malays into believing a vote for BA was a vote for an Islamic state. In the Malay electorate, PAS and keADILan accused UMNO of being ‘secular’. Dr Mahathir was criticised for his hostility towards the ulamak, for allegedly mocking the prophet, and for a recent meeting between the Malaysian and Israeli foreign ministers — the subject of a fake letter on the Internet. UMNO Youth tried to regain this ground by alleging that DAP’s membership of the Socialist International made it subservient to

Israel. But the issue was hardly ever about an Islamic state, which was notably absent from the BA election manifesto. PAS leaders campaigned together with other BA representatives, and spoke on the same issues of korupsi, kronyisma and nepotisma (KKN), democracy and 'kezaliman' against Anwar. These were also the issues highlighted in *Harakah* and the pro-PAS Internet.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's tenth elections confirmed that support for *reformasi* is very significant in Malaysia. Malays deserted UMNO in record numbers, registered disapproval of the manner in which Dr Mahathir dealt with Anwar, and voted for reform. Traditional communal concerns were, to a considerable degree, subordinated in the interests of political change. BN, by contrast, appealed to communal fears, with some success among non-Malays. Islamic issues were prominent in the campaign, because the conflict between Mahathir and Anwar has to a large extent been defined in Islamic terms. But Islamisation was never the major election issue. PAS made gains not because it represented fundamentalism, but by identifying with the mood for change, establishing its first ever coalition with the non-Muslim DAP, putting up attractive, professional candidates, and demonstrating a record of moderate and clean government during its years of rule in Kelantan state.

NOTES

- 1 *The Sunday Times*, 12 December 1999.
- 2 See Thomas Fuller in "Mahathir, in Victory, Is Dealt a Major Loss", *The International Herald Tribune*, 1 December 1999; and *Asiaweek*, 17 December 1999, p. 24.
- 3 "Mahathir's win is less than total", *Reuters* report by Nelson Graves, in *Bangkok Post*, 1 December 1999.
- 4 *Asiaweek*, 12 November, 1999, p.33.
- 5 *Utusan Malaysia*, 23 September, 1998.

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