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Outlook for Malaysia's 12th General Elections

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ABSTRACT

As Malaysia prepares for its twelfth general elections, scheduled for 8 March 2008, most pundits and observers agree that it is unlikely that the 2004 performance can be reproduced. Public opinion has homed in on the unfulfilled promises of the 2004 campaign – corruption and persist, the efficiency of the public service remains questionable, party warlords continue to dominate the BN, and minority rights continue to be eroded. Aware of the weaknesses in the BN, the opposition has signalled their intention to deny the BN a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

This paper looks to assess the key issues, themes, and actors as the script to Malaysia's twelfth general election unfolds. While it is widely expected that the BN will retain its two-thirds majority, its hold on parliament as well as many state legislatures is likely to be eroded. Unlike the previous two elections, the manner in which the ruling government has managed minority issues will see a discernible shift in the non-Malay ground, where the ethnic minority vote is likely to go to the opposition, even as the UMNO-PAS competition battles itself into a stalemate.

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Outlook for Malaysia's 12th General Elections

Introduction

On 21 March 2004, newly-appointed Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi led the incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN or National Front) coalition to one of its most resounding electoral victories ever. Campaigning on a platform that promised to curb corruption and enact political and administrative reforms, the BN romped home with 90 per cent and 89 per cent of parliamentary and state seats, respectively, securing an impressive 64 per cent of the popular vote along the way, the highest won by any prime minister in his maiden general elections.¹ Moreover, in clinching 107 out of the 117 parliamentary seats it contested, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malay-based lead party in the ruling coalition, almost single-handedly secured a majority in the Malaysian parliament. With this statistically resounding victory, it appeared that the ghosts of the 1999 *Reformasi* elections, when UMNO haemorrhaged popular support among the Malays and lost the state government of Terengganu, had finally been exorcised.

The BN's overwhelming success in 2004 has been widely attributed to three main factors. First, Abdullah Badawi's image as a sincere, humble and virtuous political leader was a welcome breath of fresh air from the stifling atmosphere of the administration of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.² Malaysians were amenable and enthused by Abdullah's leadership style—characterized by consensus building—and impressed with his declared agenda of eliminating corruption, reducing crime rates and cutting bureaucratic red tape. Second, the ultimately instrumentalist and pragmatic nature of the BN campaign allowed the coalition to capitalize on favourable economic conditions. Factors such as high economic growth, low rates of inflation and increase in investments and local consumption were strong signs that the government's economic blueprint had set the country on the right track as it recovered from the economic crisis of the late 1990s. Third, the opposition parties, in particular the Islamic Party of Malaysia or PAS, failed to seize their initiative from the 1999 elections when major dents were made to the UMNO-led BN armour. Believing that their sterling performance of 1999—in which they secured a three-fold increase in

¹ "Elections 2004 Results", *The Star Online*, available at thestar.com.my/election2004/results/results.html (accessed 8 February 2008).

² "Abdullah is your choice", *New Straits Times*, 31 December 2004.

their representation in parliament and won the state government of Terengganu—was as much a vote for their Islamist agenda as it was a rejection of UMNO in the wake of the Anwar Ibrahim saga, the clerical leadership of PAS attempted to drive home their “advantage” by releasing an Islamic-state blueprint in November 2003 and using it as a campaign platform. Not surprisingly, the non-Muslim ground responded by rejecting the opposition Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front or BA), which consisted of PAS, PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat or People’s Justice Party) and PRM (Parti Rakyat Malaysia or Malaysian People’s Party).

As Malaysia now prepares for its twelfth general elections, scheduled for 8 March 2008, most pundits and observers agree that it is unlikely that the 2004 performance can be reproduced. A litany of grievances—ranging from inflation and commodity price hikes to minority rights and corruption in the judicial system—have worked to place the Abdullah Administration on the back foot. The woes confronting the BN have been further compounded by predictable internal politicking within the main component parties such as UMNO and the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), which, on previous occasions had in fact proven costly at electoral polls. The magnitude of these problems was captured in the drastic decline in Abdullah’s own popularity rating, which had dipped from over 91 per cent in November 2004 to 61 per cent in December 2007.³ Moreover, notwithstanding the populist economic packages revealed under the Ninth Malaysia Plan and the projected growth of the economy for 2008, public opinion has homed in on unfulfilled promises of the 2004 campaign—corruption cases have mounted, crime rates have not gone down, the efficiency of the public service remains questionable, party warlords continue to dominate the BN, and the erosion of minority rights and freedoms persists.⁴ By declaring its intention to contest in every parliamentary ward available—the first time in Malaysian history—so as to deny the BN a two-thirds parliamentary majority, it is clear that, whether or not this objective is met, the Malaysian opposition senses some fundamental weaknesses in the ruling coalition.

By way of the above as a backdrop, this paper looks to assess the key issues, themes and actors as the script to Malaysia’s twelfth general elections unfolds. While

³ Fuller Thomas, “Leader Underwhelms Malaysian”, *International Herald Tribune*, 29 March 2005, available at www.iht.com/articles/2005/03/28/news/malaysia.php, and “Voter Opinion Poll 4th Quarter 2007”, Merdeka Centre, available at www.merdeka.org/ (accessed 10 February 2008).

⁴ Fuller Thomas, “Leader Underwhelms Malaysian”, *International Herald Tribune*, 29 March 2005, available at www.iht.com/articles/2005/03/28/news/malaysia.php

it is widely expected that the BN will retain its two-thirds majority, its hold on parliament as well as many state legislatures is likely to be eroded. Indeed, the uncertainty that some quarters of the Malaysian electorate will have about the opposition being a “viable alternative” on the one hand and their dissatisfaction with the BN on the other could mean the split of fence-sitter votes, where their support for state seats goes to BN candidates for fear of having state legislatures fall into oppositionist hands, while support for parliamentary seats goes to the opposition. Moreover, unlike the previous two elections, the manner in which the ruling government has managed minority issues will see a discernible shift in the non-Malay ground, where the ethnic minority vote is likely to go to the opposition. Consequently, the minority strongholds of Penang, Perak, Sabah and Selangor are likely to see close contests. In line with its contention that it is likely to be on the non-Muslim vote that the result of this election will turn, the UMNO-PAS competition, which has defined much of the political terrain in the past decade, is likely to be stalemated.

The Economic Advantage of Incumbency

Malaysia is entering the elections with its economy in a state of flux. Conservative estimates by Inter-Pacific Research projects that Malaysia’s real economy will expand by 7 per cent, supported mainly by the government’s stimulus measures in the construction and infrastructure sector.⁵ Positive sentiments regarding growth in the economy are being undermined by soaring prices of basic commodities and fuel. Increase in food prices, higher wages for civil servants and public transportation fee hikes as well as input into expansionary fiscal government projects by way of several initiatives in the Ninth Malaysian Plan and the widely-publicized Iskandar Development Region are some of the key driving forces behind spiralling inflation.⁶ With inflation rates at a 10-month high and forecasted to hover at 2.8 per cent for the rest of the year, the matter of managing the Malaysian economy is likely to be a key elections issue.⁷

Despite a global rise in basic commodities and agricultural produce, when voters go to the polls in the coming weeks, they will invariably consider the steps taken by the government to ease inflationary pressures. Fully cognizant of this, the

⁵ “Exports to take a back seat in 2008 growth”, *Bernama Daily Malaysian News*, 2 January 2008.

⁶ Damodaran Rupa, “December 2007 inflation expected to be slightly higher”, *Business Times*, 24 January 2008.

⁷ *Ibid.*

BN has already enacted populist policies such as price controls on basic food items, fuel subsidies and caps on highway tolls in order to deflect criticisms on aspects of its economic policies. Beyond the populist symbolism of such gestures, however, is a reality—which they will undoubtedly seek to drive home—that it is precisely because it is the incumbent government that the BN can dish out such subsidies at the expense of a budget deficit. Be that as it may, the question that remains, however, is whether such policies are sustainable in the long run, particularly when oil and food subsidies will likely result in huge fiscal burdens on the government.

Populist policies aside, analysts point to several productivity-driven domestic and private-sector initiatives that are widely expected to counteract an impending global recession and the concomitant dip in foreign direct investments that may follow.⁸ According to the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute, with the revival of the construction sector, the agriculture sector as outlined in the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER), the oil and gas industry as delineated in the East Corridor Economic Region (EECR) and a successful implementation of the Ninth Malaysian Plan as well as the Iskandar Development Region, Malaysia will be well poised to launch the economy into a higher growth trajectory.⁹ Yet while these projects are expected to boost the domestic and regional economies, whether or not voters will feel the positive effect of this projected GDP growth benefiting them is another issue altogether. At the moment, the short-term elections budget will probably sway votes towards the BN camp but if the long- and mid-term fiscal measures do not materialize, the BN will have a tough time retaining its voters' allegiance. More importantly, with demonstrations and rallies in full throttle, dissidents and detractors of the current government also realize the power that these acts of contention hold as bargaining tools and as platforms of mobilization for dissent, making it increasingly harder for Abdullah and his government in the future to implement new policies and execute their reform agenda.

The elections budget speaks to the larger issue of the powers of incumbency that the BN wields as it prepares for elections. To be sure, this power had been used to great effect in previous elections, particularly in the re-drawing of electoral boundaries by the Elections Commission, which was essentially used as a tool to

⁸ "Oil price to Move around 70 per barrel this year says Asli", *Bernama Daily Malaysian News*, 22 January 2008.

⁹ Ibid.

reconstitute the demographics of specific wards in order to proffer the strongest possible advantage for the BN, as well as the issue of “phantom voters” and postal votes. More recently, however, this power of incumbency has manifested itself in the enactment of last-minute stamp duties for candidates. In response, 67 civil-society groups and four opposition political parties have mobilized—in the form of Bersih (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections)—to draw attention to the need of electoral reforms. Indicative of the poignancy of this agenda (of electoral reforms), public rallies organized by Bersih have drawn large crowds.¹⁰

Malaysia’s Minorities: A Winter of Discontent?

On 25 November 2007 Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Force), a coalition of 30 Hindu non-governmental organizations committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights and heritage, staged demonstrations for the preservation of the rights of the ethnic Indian community. While the demolition of the Sri Maha Mariamman temple in Selangor by Malay-Muslim officials that month was the catalyst, the demonstrations were in fact a backlash against longstanding perceptions of marginalization.¹¹ Systematic political disenfranchisement, limited access to employment and education opportunities, erosion of minority religious rights and freedoms, and mounting poverty were some of the concerns highlighted by the Hindraf leaders. A major concern articulated by Hindraf leaders pertains to the encroachment of *shari’ah* law into their rights to freedom of religion. In the last few years, several controversies have surfaced over the issue of the burial rights of deceased ethnic Indians. At the heart of the issue is the professed religion of the deceased—while family members claimed that they were Hindu at the time of death, state Islamic religious authorities alleged that they had in fact converted to Islam.

In response to the rallies, government authorities detained five Hindraf leaders under Malaysia’s Internal Security Act, a move that only emboldened oppositionist civil-society groups to further pressure the Abdullah Administration on the streets and in the alternative media of cyberspace.

According to the government, the basis of the Hindraf-led protests was unfounded. Statistics were mobilized to show that the Indian community enjoyed a

¹⁰ “Malaysia: Mass Rally for Electoral Reforms to Defy Ban”, *Inter-Press Service News Agency*, 6 November 2007.

¹¹ Montlake Simon, “Temple demolitions anger Malaysian Indians”, *Malaysia Today*, available at www.malaysia-today.net/2008/content/view/2456/46/ (accessed 10 February 2008).

monthly household income that was 15 per cent higher than the national average, and that its unemployment rate was lower.¹² In truth, the matter of income disparity has long historical antecedents, and is hardly an accurate yardstick by which to measure the community's social-economic status. Malaysia's shift away from the plantation economy as part of its post-colonial industrialization programme meant that Indian labourers brought into Malaya under the British colonial administration to work in plantations suffered from job dislocation, which in turn led to labour migration into Malaysia's urban centres.¹³ As most ethnic Indians were products of Tamil vernacular education, they lacked the requisite qualifications for stable employment and job advancement opportunities. On the other hand, sporadic attempts to uplift the community by way of education opportunities have met with local resistance. Fearing erosion of their ethnic identity, Indian communities continue to fight for the preservation of vernacular education and have resisted attempts to integrate into the national education system, which—perceived by the Indian and Chinese minorities—in varying degrees compel the compromise of minority rights.¹⁴ The net effect of this has been that the vast majority of the ethnic Indian community has remained mired in poverty and unemployment.

The Hindraf protests, and the dislocation and discontent they symbolize, are likely to take its toll on the BN at the forthcoming polls. The signs have already surfaced, and they are not encouraging. Abdullah's approval rating among the Indian community plummeted almost overnight—from 82 per cent in September to 38 per cent in December 2007—and most analysts expect the likely swing of the ethnic Indian vote to the DAP and PKR, both parties with manifestos anchored on racial equality and egalitarianism, as among the most salient outcomes for the upcoming elections.¹⁵ No doubt the BN, and UMNO in particular, has taken pains to stave off criticisms by issuing a public apology for the Shah Alam temple demolition and declaring the annual Hindu festival, Thaipusam, a public holiday in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya. Nevertheless, it is abundantly clear that these efforts are little more than emergency appeasement strategies with the elections in mind. The fact that the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A 2004 study indicated that at least 300,000 plantation jobs were lost from 1980 to 2000. See *ibid.*

¹⁴ For instance, they will be expected to master the Malay national language at the expense of their own mother tongues.

¹⁵ "Voter Opinion Poll 4th Quarter 2007", Merdeka Centre, available at www.merdeka.org/ (accessed 10 February 2008).

BN agenda remains devoid of long-term strategies to uplift the Indian community will not be lost to the Indian voter.

Unlike the ethnic Indian community, the Chinese in Malaysia have always enjoyed a higher per capita income, possessed greater wealth in comparison to their Malay-Muslim countrymen and continue to dominate major sectors of the economy.¹⁶ Much of this has been a consequence not only of well-calibrated economic strategies on the part of Chinese business leaders, but also careful negotiation on the part of Chinese political leaders with their Malay counterparts.¹⁷ That said, the community is not without grievances—both longstanding and immediate—and a major question on many minds is the extent to which the very public displays of discontent by the Indian community will provoke a re-assessment on the part of the Chinese minority of the terms of their relationship with the Malay majority. In some respects, the prospects to that end are even more startling, given the significantly larger stake that the Chinese minority commands in the Malaysian economy, which some would suggest is hardly commensurate with their political weight and influence.

The matter of wealth ownership and affirmative action has long been a matter of considerable concern for the Chinese community. Since their articulation in 1970, the New Economic Policy (NEP) and its successor, the New Development Policy (NDP), have been well-documented issues of consternation. As recent as 2005, UMNO Youth leaders made hawkish calls for a revival of the NEP by way of an extension of the 30-per cent principle (where 30 per cent of corporate wealth have to be in the hands of *bumiputra* interests) into new areas where the Chinese currently dominate.¹⁸ The proposal has been endorsed by the BN, and UMNO Youth deputy chief Khairy Jamaluddin, son-in-law of the prime minister, even specified that the principle should also cover biotechnology, intellectual property and real-estate ownership.¹⁹

Calls of this nature—by UMNO leaders to extend the NEP—have undoubtedly sparked concerns among the Chinese community. The release of a six-

¹⁶ Imran Imtiaz Shah Yacob, “The Future of Malaysian Chinese”, Opinion Asia, Global Views on Asia, available at www.opinionasia.org/Thefutureofthemalaysianchinese (accessed 11 February 2008).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lim Kit Siang, “Barisan Nasional Supreme Council meeting yesterday most disappointing as Hishammuddin is now able to say that UMNO Youth’s call for revival of NEP has now received the endorsement of BN Supreme Council, BN Youth Council and all BN component parties”, *Democratic Action Party*, available at www.limkitsiang.com/archive/2005/aug05/lks3603.htm (accessed 12 February 2008).

¹⁹ Ibid.

minute video clip on a video search engine, YouTube, by Wee Meng Chee parodying the national anthem days before the celebration of Malaysia's 50th National Day, captured the depth of animosity borne by certain sections of the Chinese community. In the video, Wee levelled a barrage of criticisms against the government, the most controversial of which was Wee's provocative caricature of pro-Malay policies that continue to exist at the expense of progress and development of ethnic minorities. Underlying this criticism is a belief among many Malaysian Chinese that the *raison d'être* of the NEP—to manufacture a more equitable distribution of wealth among the races—has already been accomplished, if not surpassed. While predictably the subject of intense debate, certain statistics appears to provide evidence that the gap between Malays and Chinese in income disparity has narrowed considerably. For instance, some statistics indicate that by 2002, income disparity between Malays and Chinese has fallen from 1:2 in 1970 to 1:1.7.²⁰ The number of Malay professionals such as doctors, lawyers and engineers has also gone up from 4.9 per cent in 1970 to 31 per cent in 2002, while the number of Chinese professionals has dropped from 61 per cent to 54 per cent over the same period.²¹ Given these statistics, many Chinese feel that the NEP, which in any case favours mostly a small coterie of elite Malay businessmen with political patronage while disadvantaging the bulk of the Malay middle class, ought to be terminated.²² Partly for this reason, it is widely expected that two out of every three eligible Chinese voters—more than 60 per cent—will likely vote for the opposition.²³

The Islam Factor

Economic grievances aside, it is matters of religion—primarily the primacy and politicization of Islam—that will weigh heavily on the minds of Malaysia's ethnic minorities.

Malaysians, both Muslims and non-Muslims, enter into the elections this year confronted by the deep penetration that Islam has made into public discourse. Issues ranging from Abdullah's vision of a progressive and modern Islamic state through the

²⁰ Hong Carolyn, "The Chinese View: Extending NEP smacks of moving goalposts", *Malaysia Today*, available at www.malaysia-today.net/Blog-e/2005/08/chinese-view.htm (accessed 12 February 2008).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² This was a point made by Anwar Ibrahim at a seminar organized by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 22 August 2007.

²³ Imran Imtiaz Shah Yacob, "The Future of Malaysian Chinese", *Opinion Asia*, Global Views on Asia, available at www.opinionasia.org/Thefutureofthemalaysianchinese (accessed 11 February 2008).

principles of *Islam Hadhari*, to controversial everyday issues such as the prohibition of the usage of the term “Allah” by non-Muslims, have provoked a stream of public debate on the role of Islam in Malaysia.

During a conference held in Kuala Lumpur on the theme, “The role of Islamic States in a Globalised World”, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak claimed that “we (Malaysia) have never, never been secular ... we are an Islamic state”.²⁴ Najib’s flippant remarks roused passionate and effusive reactions from both the Muslim and non-Muslims camps. If this was a strategic move by Najib to rally for the conservative Malay votes, it clearly did not succeed. The general sentiment, as captured on various Malay blogs, was that of repugnance towards Najib’s allusion that Malaysia is an Islamic state. Many felt that Malaysia should not be compared to an Islamic state, and it was a disgrace to Islam that Malaysian leaders had the audacity to do so.²⁵ In addition, PAS leaders have asserted that UMNO will continue to exploit the dichotomy between the Islamic and secular state, as it is “the best ‘bogy’ to keep the nation divided and subdued under its (UMNO’s) hegemony”.²⁶ Others opined that the declaration by Najib that Malaysia is already an Islamic state, even though Islamic laws have not been implemented, is an example of how the government has backtracked on its ‘promise’ for more Islam.²⁷

For non-Muslims, however, Najib’s comments and its implications portended far more than mere political brinkmanship and jockeying on the part of Malay politicians; it touched the very heart of mounting concerns over their rights as minorities in Malaysia. Najib’s remarks were followed soon after by another major, highly publicized case that caused alarm in non-Muslim circles—the High Court decision over the right of Malaysia’s civil law system to rule on matters of religion.

The Lina Joy Case

On 30 May 2007, the Malaysian Federal Court finally made a much-awaited decision regarding the apostasy case surrounding Lina Joy. In a landmark pronouncement that will likely reverberate across the Malaysian social-political landscape for a long time,

²⁴ “Malaysia not secular state says Najib”, *Bernama*, 17 July 2007, available at www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news.php?id=273699

²⁵ Shahirah Mahmood, *Public Opinion in Malaysia Relating to Recent Declarations of Malaysia as an Islamic State and Various Controversial Murtaad (Apostasy) Cases*, unpublished.

²⁶ Dzulkifli Ahmad, “The Great Malaysian Paradox”, *The Other Malaysia*, 5 September 2008, available at www.othermalaysia.org/content/view/104/1/

²⁷ Interview with Mufti of Perak, June 2006.

the Federal Court ruled by a margin of 2-to-1 in favour of dismissing Lina Joy's appeal against an earlier High Court decision that she could not have the word "Islam" removed from her identity card without the endorsement of the Shari'ah Court, which, according to Article 121 1(A) of the Malaysian Constitution, governs Muslim families and personal law in Malaysia.

Born Azalina Jailani to Muslim parents on 8 January 1964, Lina Joy converted to Christianity and was baptized at the age of 26. She applied to the National Registration Department (NRD) to change her name on 10 October 1999. Her application was successful and she was required to apply for a new identity card with her new name, as part of the procedure. In that application, however, her attempt to have the word "Islam" omitted from her new identity card was rejected by the NRD on grounds that she could not change her religion unless she possessed requisite documentation from the Shari'ah Court endorsing her conversion, which she did not. (Effective 1 October 1999, it became compulsory for Malaysian Muslims to have their religion—Islam—appear on their identity cards.) In an attempt to have the word "Islam" removed from her new identity card, Lina Joy proceeded to file a suit against the Director of the NRD, the government and the Federal Territories Religious Council in 2001. Her suit was thrown out by both the High Court and the Court of Appeal. The case was ultimately brought to the Federal Court in April 2006.

According to the Federal Court, the case pertained only to the matter of whether the NRD was right to deny Lina's application to omit the word "Islam" on her identity card without a Shari'ah Court order. The undercurrents, however, flowed much deeper. At the heart of the matter is the question of who has the right and authority to define the religious status of Malaysian citizens.

After a lengthy period of deliberation, during which emotions ran high among both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, the Federal Court ruled on 30 May 2007 that only an Islamic *shari'ah* tribunal could certify her renunciation of Islam and, by virtue of that, the legitimacy of her conversion. In the eyes of the Malaysian judicial system, Lina Joy remains a Muslim despite her public renunciation of the faith (by virtue of her baptism into the Christian religion) many years ago.

The Federal Court's ruling on the high-profile Lina Joy case has implications far beyond the matter of what can or cannot be printed on a Malaysian's identity card. First, even though the Federal Court avoided framing the issue as a constitutional one, the case has already taken on constitutional proportions in popular mindsets and

discourse, and this ruling is likely to set a legal precedent on debates over religious freedom and the extent to which *shari'ah* enjoys precedence over civil law on the matter of religious conversion. Second, by virtue of its high profile, the Lina Joy case has further sharpened the socio-religious divide in Malaysia. Prior to this, a number of controversial High Court rulings were already putting stress on Malaysia's multi-cultural fabric. One such case in 2004 pertains to the rights of a Hindu mother in bringing up her two sons, who had purportedly converted to Islam along with her estranged husband, in the Hindu faith after she had obtained custody of them. The High Court, while granting her custody of the children, also ruled that they were to remain Muslims against the mother's wishes. With this ruling, the perception set in among non-Muslims that the constitutional role of the civil High Court to protect minority rights is fast eroding. In an attempt to defend minority rights, non-Muslim groups formed the Article 11 Coalition in May 2004 to protect the constitutional right of freedom of religion. In an obvious retaliatory measure, Muslim civil-society groups mobilized and formed Pembela (Defenders of Islam) to stem the tide of apostasy among Muslims and defend the Islamic faith, the official religion of Malaysia, from legal challenges posed by "apostate Muslims" and non-Muslims. Since its formation, Pembela has grown into a mammoth coalition consisting of 70 Islamic non-governmental organizations of various shapes and sizes, including professional Malay-Muslim organizations.

Finally, notwithstanding Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's protests to the contrary, the Lina Joy ruling, and the developments that followed (particularly the Hindraf protests), have polarized Malaysian society and fanned the embers of discontent among Malaysia's non-Muslims.

Inter-faith Issues

Public debate over the matter of freedom of religion escalated further during this period when the Inter-faith Commission of Malaysia (ICM), a consultative and conciliatory body aimed at promoting awareness of various religious beliefs and religious harmony, made firm requests for official recognition of its status as a legitimate organization by the Malaysian government.²⁸ In response, Abdullah reiterated an earlier stance in which he proposed that the commission focus instead on

²⁸ Lee Ban Chen, "Interfaith commission – Why fear it?" *Malaysiakini*, available at www.malaysiakini.com/columns/34017 (accessed 15 February 2008).

the more ambiguous objective of fostering “inter-faith dialogue”.²⁹ Najib added that affiliate members of the ICM must consider the sensitivities of Muslims when making suggestions, which could be seen as interfering in Islam-related matters. PAS, on the other hand, asserted that the National Fatwa Council or the Islamic Development Department government agency was in a better position to handle such issues.³⁰ Its ex-deputy chief, Idris Ahmad, opined that open discussion on the issue would be detrimental to the position of Islam and *shari’ah* in governing the lives of Muslims. The concordant stance that UMNO and PAS have taken on issues such as apostasy, *shari’ah* and inter-faith issues is indicative of the importance of Islamist credentials on the part of these Muslim parties.

The recent proscription on the usage of the term “Allah” by non-Muslims testifies further to how the government is (deliberately or otherwise) curbing the religious liberties of non-Muslims, in this case, Christians. A vast number of Christians in Malaysia use al-Kitab, the Indonesian version of the Bible, instead of an English-language Bible, as they are now more conversant in their national language.³¹ Al-Kitab traditionally refers to the Christian God as “Allah”. Therefore, prohibition on the usage of the term is in some eyes tantamount to a contravention of Article 11 in the constitution, which ensures freedom of worship and religion. The ban reflects further the growing concern within the Malay-Muslim community that with the negative portrayal of Islam in the global media, there will be a high tendency for non-Muslims who are ignorant of the religion to trivialize the sacredness of the term “Allah”.

The above discussions have flagged some of the pressing issues that are likely to define the parameters of campaigning and electoral politics at the general elections. This paper now moves to briefly consider the main actors in the script, and assesses the prospects and likely challenges confronting them as they prepare for the polls

UMNO (United Malay National Organisation)

Since its performance in the 2004 general elections, UMNO appears to be back on the ascent. Demonstrative of this, its leaders have publicly expressed confidence that they can wrest the Kelantan state assembly from PAS. Given the paper-thin majority that

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Oh Steve, “Ban on ‘Allah’ Term Bizarre”, *Malaysiakini*, available at www.malaysiakini.com/letters/76676 (accessed 16 February 2008).

PAS current has in the Kelantan state legislature, a strong showing by UMNO in that state could indeed threaten the PAS incumbents.³² UMNO's ambitions in Kelantan, however, and more generally across the country, will hinge on its ability to surmount a number of obstacles at the national-societal level (the more pressing of which have been discussed in detail above) as well as within the party. An obvious challenge confronting UMNO, and the Malaysian government in general, is the broad concern over rising food and fuel prices that many analysts expect to worsen next year. Endemic internal divisions among UMNO leaders, while not as stark as in 1999, may continue to plague party unity in several constituencies. In addition, corruption charges against the country's leadership and worsening relations among the different ethnic groups are likely to have a considerable impact on UMNO's performance in the elections.

Despite promises of reform, corruption remains an endemic problem under the leadership of Abdullah Badawi. After taking office in 2004, Abdullah moved to give substance to his election assurances to stamp out corruption by arresting several government and business leaders for alleged misuse of money and resources. These leaders included Cooperative Development Minister Kasitah Gaddam and the politically connected Managing Director of loss-saddled steel giant Perwaja Steel, Eric Chia Eng Hock.³³ Since those arrests, however, the anti-corruption blitz has petered out, and many observers subsequently concluded, not without basis, that these trials were a mere façade to distract the public from the real culprits of larger corruption scandals. In truth, the corruption situation has in fact escalated, with even the prime minister and his family coming under scrutiny. The government's procurement of a US\$50 million jet for the prime minister's personal use was a matter of hot debate among the Malaysian public.³⁴ Abdullah's son, Kamaluddin Badawi, and son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin, have also found themselves in the centre of various allegations of exploitation of family ties for business interests and financial gain.³⁵ The severity of the issue came to the fore when Shahrir Samad, the outspoken chairman of the ruling BN Backbenchers Club, resigned over the refusal of fellow Members of Parliament to support a motion tabled by opposition leader Lim Kit Siang

³² "PM says people in Kelantan ready for change", *Bernama*, 4 February 2007.

³³ Anil Netto, "Malaysian net catches sharks – or anchovies", *Asia Times*, 14 February 2004.

³⁴ "Malaysian PM's new \$50-mln jet order sparks row", *Reuters*, 29 January 2007.

³⁵ See, "Scrutiny of Abdullah's family should be based on fact: Khairy", *Straits Times*, 25 September 2006.

to refer an unnamed BN MP before the Parliamentary Privileges Committee to investigate claims that he had tried to pressure customs officers to allow timber to be brought in illegally from Indonesia.³⁶ Put simply, these corruption scandals and allegations have damaged Abdullah's initial image as an untainted politician. Many Malaysians who had earlier supported Abdullah precisely because of his promise to fight corruption and nepotism will undoubtedly take these developments into consideration at the ballot box.

Another issue that will affect UMNO's electoral performance is the matter of division among UMNO leaders, which, in truth, has proven time and again to be endemic to party politics. By far, the most notable of these divisions are personal criticisms mounted by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed against Abdullah. Mahathir's dissatisfaction with Abdullah stems from Mahathir's perception that his successor has moved to curtail a number of major infrastructure projects that he has initiated. Mahathir began to attack a range of policies enacted by the present government on issues as diverse as the attempted rescue of the national car company, Proton, relations with Singapore, and the allocation of import licenses for luxury cars.³⁷ Mahathir upped the ante when he called on voters at the Ijok by-elections not to back the BN candidate "blindly" and to "send a signal" to the government.³⁸ More importantly, he called on the prime minister to give way to his deputy, Najib Tun Razak, whom he suggested was a more suitable leader.³⁹

The Mahathir-Badawi rift is likely to at least have some sort of an impact on UMNO's showing in the state of Kedah, Mahathir's home state, where he remains influential. Mahathir's supporters are believed to be unhappy with the Kedah chief minister's attempt to sideline them from the state party machinery.⁴⁰ There have been rumours of further leadership tussles among UMNO stalwarts. One in particular that has received relatively wide circulation involves Shahidan Kassim, the Chief Minister of Perlis, and two cabinet ministers holding parliamentary seats in the state, Azmi Khalid and Radzi Sheikh Ahmad. Radzi has openly criticized Shahidan's leadership and called for the latter to resign as Perlis' Chief Minister.⁴¹ In response, Shahidan announced that Radzi and Azmi Khalid had not been nominated by their respective

³⁶ "Lawmaker quits as BN backbenchers' leader", *Straits Times*, 5 May 2006.

³⁷ For more on these issues, see, "Dr M: It is about Proton", *New Straits Times*, 7 August 2005.

³⁸ "Send signal to Barisan in Ijok", *Straits Times*, 27 April 2007.

³⁹ "I have never met Mongolian Model: Najib", *Straits Times*, 22 April 2007.

⁴⁰ Conversation with a PAS member in Kedah.

⁴¹ "Radzi: It's time for a leadership change in Perlis", *New Straits Times*, 30 December 2007.

UMNO divisions to stand in the elections.⁴² The matter of party discipline also came into play in Abdullah's apparent inability to introduce fresh faces on nomination day. Indeed, talk of new and younger candidates for the 2008 elections all but dissipated when it was announced that seasoned party warlords who were rumoured to possibly be retired by the party leadership, not only in UMNO but in other senior BN constituent parties as well, have again been slated to contest.

Islam Hadhari

Adapted from the thought of fourteenth century Muslim historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun and articulated in the language of reform, *Islam Hadhari*, the slogan that underscored Abdullah's 2004 electoral success, comprised 10 lofty principles that, according to Abdullah, would provide the spiritual foundation for Malaysia's entry into the new millennium as a modern and competitive Muslim-led country. Though couched as modern Islamic philosophy, the genesis of *Islam Hadhari* is unmistakably political in how it provides the platform for UMNO to regain ground that has previously been lost to the Islamist opposition party PAS. Since then, the question on many minds has been whether the potential for reform that *Islam Hadhari* held for post-Mahathir Malaysia will indeed be realized, or if it is little more than campaign rhetoric.

While the tendency among many is to view *Islam Hadhari* as a path-breaking concept, on closer inspection it is little more than a repackaging of old ideas. It is well known that as prime minister in the mid 1980s, Mahathir oversaw the Islamization of the Malaysian polity and bureaucracy, a major facet of which was an initiative to construct an Islamic work ethic that could underpin the industrialization of the country. Termed "*Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam*" (Inculcation of Islamic Values), this policy effectively formed the base for his developmental and modernization strategies. A decade later, then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim coined the term "*Masyarakat Madani*" (Civil Society) to describe his own vision of Muslim governance in Malaysia, one that would be inclusive, just and democratic.

Moreover, it remains unclear how the abstract principles of *Islam Hadhari* have been, or indeed can be, operationalized. The inability of the Malaysian government under Abdullah Badawi to make this abstract concept speak to the

⁴² "Leaders to discuss Perlis dispute", *New Straits Times*, 31 December 2007.

everyday realities confronting the Malaysian people, particularly the non-Muslim minority, was made abundantly clear when *Islam Hadhari* was conspicuously absent in the government's explanation of how it would address a host of challenges such as the integrity of the judiciary, rising inflation, polarization wrought by the deepening of Islamic conservatism and perceived encroachment on non-Muslim rights. In fact, by enunciating "Belief in Allah" as its first principle, the concept of *Islam Hadhari* marks a discernible shift from the *Rukunegara* ("National Principles", enunciated via royal proclamation in 1970), which has as its first principle "Belief in God". In so doing, it has inadvertently contributed to the escalation of the Islamization discourse and further heightened the reservations of non-Muslims.

Ultimately, to non-Muslim ears, *Islam Hadhari* has proven to be less about Islam or civilization than it has been about the all-too-familiar refrain of Malay primacy. While lip service is paid to the protection of the "rights of minority groups" by the champions of *Islam Hadhari* (and this is indeed one of the 10 principles), the baggage of race has undoubtedly weighed it down. This is evident when Abdullah pronounced in his 2004 UMNO General Assembly speech, "*Islam Hadhari* is complete and comprehensive, with an emphasis on the development of the economy and civilization, capable of building Malay competitiveness. The glorious heritage of the Islamic civilization in all its aspects must be used as a reference in order to become the source of inspiration for the Malay race to prosper."

As a testimony to how *Islam Hadhari* has been held hostage to race politics, it is noteworthy how its "lessons" were all but lost at the 2005 and 2006 UMNO general assemblies as racial politics reared its head yet again when some UMNO Youth leaders 'reminded' non-Malays that they were recipients of Malay-Muslim goodwill that permitted them to merely *menumpang* (temporarily reside) on Malaysian soil, while others called for the reinstatement of the 30-year-old New Economic Policy. In sum, despite Abdullah's claim that *Islam Hadhari* is for every Malaysian, there remains very little in the concept that speaks to the practical concerns of non-Muslims.

Despite these challenges, several factors may work expectedly to the advantage of UMNO. Support for UMNO among Malays in general seems to remain fairly strong, or at least unlike that in 1999. There has not been any indication that this support has been substantially eroded. Recent polls conducted by the Merdeka Centre have shown that about 70 per cent of Malays remain generally positive towards

Abdullah's government. This can be attributed to several factors. While the emergence of various racial and religious issues has drawn attention to the UMNO-led coalition's track record of managing a pluralist political configuration, there are quarters among the Malay community who see Abdullah as standing firm against pressures from non-Muslims in defence of Islam and the entitlements of the Malay-Muslim majority in Malaysia. In the recent slew of apostasy and conversion cases, the Malaysian government has been seen in several quarters to be "defending" Islam, and this will be an important campaign message that is likely to be mobilized in the northern states where UMNO will be facing a serious challenge from PAS.

PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or the Islamic Party of Malaysia)

The race for the Malay vote in the coming elections is likely to be less predictable than in previous elections. In the 2004 elections, PAS banked on its Islamic-state blueprint to garner support.⁴³ This created tensions between PAS and its opposition colleagues in BA (Barisan Alternatif or Alternative Front) as well as the DAP. Given the party's subsequent dismal showing, PAS leaders have promised to soften the party's stance on the Islamic-state issue.⁴⁴ This shift has been echoed by ex-deputy prime minister of Malaysia and current PKR adviser, Anwar Ibrahim, who claimed that "PAS's intention to establish an Islamic state is no longer an issue".⁴⁵

Beyond the rhetoric that is characteristic of such campaign posturing, the commitment of PAS to the establishment of an Islamic state remains unclear. To say that PAS has categorically distanced itself from the Islamic-state objective would probably be erroneous given that the latter has been articulated as the party's priority since the early 1980s. Moreover, it should also be noted that in the states of Terengganu and Kelantan, PAS has managed to attain a significant amount of support precisely by playing the Islamic-state hand. Indeed, given the traditional effectiveness of the rhetoric of the Islamic state in its northern strongholds and the fact that the sway of conservatism continues to be strong among its *ulama* leadership, it is likely that the party will turn to the Islamic-state issue in its contest for state legislatures in

⁴³ See Patricia Martinez, "Islam, constitutional democracy, and the Islamic state in Malaysia" in Lee Hock Guan (Ed.), *Civil Society in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ISEAS, 2004.

⁴⁴ Beh Lih Yi, "PAS to 'soften' stance on Islamic state", *Malaysiakini*, 20 January 2005, available at malaysiakini.com/news/33013.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

northern Malaysia, even while it adopts a more conciliatory tone at the hustings for parliamentary seats.

Interestingly, notwithstanding the party's avowed commitment to Islamic governance, PAS has also sought to leverage on the consternation of Malaysia's ethnic minorities in the wake of UMNO's rallying call of Malay primacy. In response to the Malaysian government's recent clampdown on protests staged by Hindraf, PAS moved quickly to criticize the heavy-handed response of the government and fanned the embers of discontent by charging that UMNO discriminated against ethnic minorities.⁴⁶ In a move clearly calculated to capitalize on the ethnic Indian opposition to the government, PAS made public claims to have won ethnic Indian support in some of its constituencies and that the demolition of Hindu temples—a major grievance articulated by Hindraf—was unheard of in Kelantan.⁴⁷

To be fair, the response of PAS to these matters of religious rights of Malaysia's minorities is not solely driven by the instrumentalist logic of pragmatic politics. Since the religious turn in the party in the early 1980s, party leaders have laboured to separate religion from ethnicity, a relationship enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution that stipulates that all Malays must be Muslims, de facto implying that the notion of Malay primacy necessarily meant Muslim primacy as well. To that effect, PAS has regularly condemned UMNO's brand of racial politics as *assabiyah* (tribalism), which is deemed un-Islamic in mainstream Islamic thought for how it contravenes the universal virtues of Islam. It is in this manner that PAS claims to be more tolerant of non-Muslim rights to build places of worship such as temples and churches. In the most recent controversy over the usage of the word "Allah" in a Malaysian Christian newspaper in reference to God, a move that was roundly condemned in some quarters of the ruling government, the chairman of the PAS Ulama Council, Ustaz Daud Iraqi, noted that it was indeed permissible for Christians

⁴⁶ Azamin Amin, "*Hindraf: PAS kesal hak asasi rakyat dicabuli*" ("HINDRAF: PAS regrets human rights abuses"), *Harakah Daily*, 25 November 2007, available at www.harakahdaily.net/bm/index.php/utama/hindraf-pas-kesal-hak-asasi-rakyat-dicabuli.html. PAS was careful to warn, however, that it did not agree with all of Hindraf's demands either. See Dato' Seri Tuan Guru Abdul Hadi Awang, "*Hak berhimpun diakui, tetapi sebahagian tuntutan Hindraf melampau*" ("HINDRAF's right to assemble must be respected but some of its demands are unacceptable"), *Harakah Daily*, 3 December 2007, available at www.harakahdaily.net/bm/index.php/arkib-utama/hak-berhimpun-diakui-tetapi-sebahagian-tuntutan-hindraf-melampau.html

⁴⁷ Haidar Taslin, "*PAS Kapar raih sokongan masyarakat India*" ("PAS Kapar receives Indian community support"), *Harakah Daily*, 31 January 2008, available at www.harakahdaily.net/bm/index.php/utama/dpp-kapar-raih-sokongan-masyarakat-india.html

to use the word “Allah”.⁴⁸ Others in the party further noted that usage of the word “Allah” is common among Christians in the Middle East and has never been a source of conflict or problem. In a novel attempt to transcend racial-religious boundaries, PAS announced that it would be fielding a non-Muslim candidate for the first time in the 2008 elections when it unveiled 29-year-old Kumutha Raman as their candidate for the Tiram state constituency in Johor.

Moving beyond their Islamist agenda, PAS leaders have made clear that their election campaign at the national level will focus on a manifesto that holds out the promise of a welfare state system—“*negara kebajikan*”.⁴⁹ Components of this agenda include populist initiatives such as free education, free water utilities throughout the country, cheaper fuel and health subsidies.⁵⁰ Furthermore, wealth and income distribution will be pursued through a taxation policy that focuses on large businesses in order to offset subsidies earmarked for the poor.⁵¹ Not only will the welfare-state concept dull the edges of its Islamist agenda, it can in the larger picture enhance the appeal of the party across the electorate, particularly since specific reference has also been made to issues of meritocracy and the importance of the presence of non-Malay ministers.⁵²

Notwithstanding its efforts, the perennial problem of winning the trust and support of the non-Muslim minorities remains, and ultimately PAS is limited in terms of the concessions it can afford to make without undermining its own core identity as an Islamist party. Given these constraints, it is hardly surprising to note that just as the PAS leadership attempts to enhance its appeal beyond the conservative Malay-Muslim belt in the north, the party has remained conspicuously silent on issues of

⁴⁸ Azamin Amin, “*Tidak salah penganut Kristian guna kalimah ALLAH – Dewan Ulama PAS Pusat*” (“It is permissible for Christians to use the term Allah – PAS Ulama Council”), *Harakah*, 3 January 2008, available at ulamak.pas.org.my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=29&Itemid=2

⁴⁹ Basiron Abdul Wahab, “*Pilihan raya umum: Negara kebajikan, tabung biasiswa antara tawaran PAS*” (“General elections: PAS offers a welfare state and bursary fund”), *Harakah Daily*, 28 August 2007, available at www.harakahdaily.net/bm/index.php/arkib-pahang-darul-makmur/pilihan-raya-umum-negara-kebajikan-tabung-biasiswa-antara-tawaran-pas.html

⁵⁰ “*PAS mampu lahirkan negara kebajikan bila diberi peluang tadbir pusat*” (“PAS can establish welfare state if allowed to administer at the federal level”), *Harakah Daily*, 22 January 2008, available at www.harakahdaily.net/bm/index.php/arkib-kelantan-darul-naim/pas-mampu-lahirkan-negara-kebajikan-bila-diberi-peluang-tadbir-pusat.html. See also, Basiron Abdul Wahab, “*Pilihan raya umum: Negara kebajikan, tabung biasiswa antara tawaran PAS*” (“General elections: PAS offers a welfare state and bursary fund”), *Harakah Daily*, 28 August 2007, available at www.harakahdaily.net/bm/index.php/arkib-pahang-darul-makmur/pilihan-raya-umum-negara-kebajikan-tabung-biasiswa-antara-tawaran-pas.html

⁵¹ Muda Mohd Noor, “*PAS akan lantik orang Cina jadi menteri*” (“PAS will appoint Chinese minister”), *Malaysiakini*, 6 February 2008, available at www.malaysiakini.com/news/77875

⁵² Ibid.

apostasy and conversions. Noticeably, the bulk of the sabre-rattling from the Islamist camp has come from Pembela, which is backed and endorsed by PAS.⁵³ As in the case of previous elections, the inability of PAS to project a coherent agenda against the backdrop of the spectrum of race and religious politics in Malaysia that is becoming increasingly polarized may well prove to be its biggest stumbling block.⁵⁴ Should this scenario materialize, PAS may well be left with little more than its traditional bastion of support in northern Malaysia.

PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat or People's Justice Party)

The 2008 elections will be an important litmus test for PKR and the future of Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysian politics. Born in the cauldron of *Reformasi* politics of 1998, PKR has had to cope with criticisms that it was a one-issue party—the issue being the release of Anwar Ibrahim.⁵⁵ Given that Anwar is no longer incarcerated, all eyes are on whether the party can re-package itself into a serious, multi-ethnic challenge to the hegemony of the BN.

In trying to break away from ethnic alignments that have long defined party politics in Malaysia, PKR has attempted to transcend barriers by positioning itself as a multi-ethnic party. In the 2004 elections, this agenda cut little ice with a Malaysian electorate then enamoured with Abdullah Badawi. As a result, the party was trounced at the elections, winning a solitary parliamentary seat by a razor-thin margin (in Anwar's Permatang Pauh constituency). PKR is likely to improve its performance in the coming elections, if not in the number of seats then almost certainly in their percentage of support. The harbinger of this possible change of fortunes is, not surprisingly, the return of Anwar Ibrahim to Malaysian politics. Released in 2005 when the Malaysian High Court overturned his sodomy ruling, Anwar hit the ground running and wasted no time in making his mark felt in Malaysian politics. Through tireless forays into the national speaking circuit, Anwar has positioned himself as *the*

⁵³ Liew Chin Tong, "PAS leadership: New faces and old constraints", *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2007. Singapore: ISEAS, 2007. See also Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, "We are committed to dialogue", *Aliran Monthly*, Vol. 25, Issue 6, 2005, available at <http://www.aliran.com/oldsite/monthly/2005a/6g.html>

⁵⁴ Mohd Azmi Abdul Hamid, "Murtad mesti ditentukan undang-undang Islam" ("Apostasy must be decided by Islamic laws"), *Harakah Daily*, 4 June 2007, available at www.harakahdaily.net/bm/index.php/arkib-kenyataan-rasmi/murtad-mesti-ditentukan-undang-undang-islam.html. See also, Herman Samsudeen, "Terbukti UMNO tidak serius tangani isu murtad" ("UMNO is not serious about resolving apostasy issue"), 10 July 2007, available at dppwp.wordpress.com/2007/07/10/terbukti-umno-tidak-serius-tangani-isu-murtad/

⁵⁵ Liow Chin Yong Joseph, "Continuity and change in Malaysian politics: Assessing the buildup to the 1999–2000 general elections", *IDSS Working Paper Series*, No. 5, 1999.

leader who can appeal to the widest possible spectrum of Malaysian society. In orchestrating an agreement between the DAP and PAS to avoid three-cornered fights, the Anwar factor could well prove instrumental in several electoral contests. Despite frequent denials to the contrary, most observers see the elections as deliberately timed to ensure that Anwar will not be able to contest himself. That said, Anwar has already indicated that elected PKR members will be prepared to stand down after April 2008, when the ban on Anwar from competing in elections expires, for Anwar to contest in a by-election.

Notwithstanding the freight of the Anwar factor, the PKR leadership is also fully aware of the need to expand its agenda beyond its talismanic advisor. To that effect, the party has introduced a field of young, well-educated candidates of various ethnic backgrounds as they declared their intention to contest in up to 70 parliamentary wards, the largest fielding of candidates from any opposition party. Additionally, conditions in Malaysia today work in favour of PKR's agenda of justice and reform. In recent times, public protests against the electoral system, spiralling inflation and commodity prices, and minority rights have created conditions that could, with thoughtful strategizing, work in PKR's favour, particularly in urban areas such as Selangor, Penang and the Federal Territory, where there are large concentrations of politically-conscious middle-class voters. In recent months, Anwar has further provoked the incumbent government and increased his own visibility by intensifying criticism of the government's affirmative-action principle and campaigning for the plight of the ethnic Indian minority.⁵⁶

On balance, given the prominence that Anwar has come to assume since his release, it is clear that it is not only Abdullah Badawi's political future at stake in this election, but likely that of Anwar Ibrahim's as well. That said, PKR itself will have to deal with some potential stumbling blocks—two, in particular, stand out. First, given the party's emaciation in 2004, it remains uncertain if it still commands the sizable electoral machinery required to sustain and support contests in 70 parliamentary wards. Previous forays into by-elections saw the party relying heavily on the machinery of PAS and its tried-and-tested *ceramah* network. This time around, however, PAS will be concentrating on its own battles, and may well have little resources available for its BA ally. Second, despite the return of Anwar, some

⁵⁶ "Malaysia's Anwar condemns use of security law", *Reuters*, 14 December 2007.

quarters among the minority communities remain cautious about him and what he purports to represent. Recalling that it was Anwar who orchestrated much of the Islamization process that Mahathir had set in place in the 1980s, as well as a slew of pro-Malay education policies when he served as education minister, it will not be surprising if at least some among the ethnic minorities decide to keep Anwar and, by virtue of that, PKR, at arm's length.

BN Component Parties

Few would disagree that it is the non-Muslim electorate that will cast the pivotal vote come 8 March 2008. The previous two general elections witnessed non-Muslims throwing their support behind the ruling coalition. The picture since then, however, has been considerably more ambiguous. At the Machap by-elections of 2006, the BN, while victorious, saw its majority eroded markedly by the DAP. Likewise at Ijok, a large number of Chinese cast their votes for the losing PKR candidate. While the BN triumphed at both by-elections, the voting patterns have been indicative of shifts on the non-Muslim ground.

These by-election results are early indications that the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the second largest party in the BN, may be witnessing a weakening of its influence over the Chinese. The pressing challenge for MCA and Gerakan, another Chinese-dominated component party of the BN, will be to convince the non-Muslim electorate that their interests are best served by these two parties within the system of Malay primacy expressed in the UMNO-led ruling coalition. More specifically, these parties will have to demonstrate that they are prepared to champion the non-Malay cause and not merely toe the UMNO line.

To be fair, MCA leaders have not remained silent. In response to the whole range of court rulings on religious conversions alluded to earlier, MCA President Ong Ka Ting submitted a memorandum on behalf of all non-Muslim members of the Malaysian cabinet to the prime minister in January 2006 to request for a review of Article 121(1A) of the Federal Constitution, which stipulates that civil courts have no jurisdiction over matters relating to Islam.⁵⁷ It was later learnt that the MCA religious and legal bureaus were behind the drafting of the memorandum.⁵⁸ Intense pressure was then applied on the ministers to withdraw their signatures from the memo, and all

⁵⁷ "MEMO TO PM", *New Straits Times*, 20 January 2006.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

but one subsequently did. In the wake of this episode, the non-Muslim ministers, particularly those from MCA, were heavily criticized for capitulating to Malay political pressure. Likewise, when UMNO Youth leaders made veiled threats to the non-Malay community at the 2005 and 2006 party assemblies, retorts made by MCA Youth leaders were shouted down by their Malay colleagues in the BN.

The MCA's credibility deficit in the eyes of the Chinese community has been compounded by internal struggles within the party leadership. Since the 2004 elections, the party had to endure a leadership challenge when former Health Minister Chua Jui Meng launched an unsuccessful bid to unseat incumbent President Ong Ka Ting.⁵⁹ In late 2007, videos of Vice-President Chua Soi Lek's sexual improprieties surfaced. While such sex scandals are not uncommon in Malaysian politics, it is believed that his political rivals in MCA orchestrated the entire saga, and this very public humiliation can prove costly for the party at the polls.

At stake for the MCA is not merely its reputation among the Malaysian Chinese population but also its position in the BN coalition. Both MCA and Gerakan are seen as the representatives of Chinese interests in the BN, although the latter is officially a multi-ethnic party. Not surprisingly, both parties share an uneasy relationship within the coalition, epitomized, among other things, by their intermittent jockeying for primacy in and over Penang, the only state in Peninsular Malaysia where non-Muslims are a majority. Based on their electoral performances in Penang, both MCA and Gerakan have regularly called for an increase in their respective quota of cabinet positions. These calls have occasionally been made at cross-purposes to each other as they jockey for primacy within the coalition government.

The mounting pressures confronting MCA and Gerakan, however, pale in comparison to the challenges confronting the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Indeed, the MIC has found itself at the centre of the latest storm to hit Malaysian politics and, to all intents and purposes, could well prove to be the BN's Achilles heel.

When Hindraf mounted a series of protests in November 2007, its institutional target was not only the Malaysian government but, specifically, the MIC and its besieged leader, Samy Vellu.⁶⁰ At the heart of the protests was the plight of Malaysia's ethnic Indian minority, which constitutes approximately eight per cent of

⁵⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the MCA leadership tussle, see James Chin, "New Chinese leadership in Malaysia: The contest for the MCA and Gerakan presidency", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 28 No. 1, 2006.

⁶⁰ "Facing Malaysia's racial issues", *Time*, 26 November 2007.

the population, and the perceived failure of the MIC to press their interests. In the recent Ninth Malaysian Plan report, it was highlighted that Indians controlled only 1.2 per cent of the corporate wealth in Malaysia, a decline from the previous 1.5 per cent.⁶¹ Indeed, the economic woes of the ethnic Indian community have already been addressed earlier.

Another major issue related to the Indian community in Malaysia is the issue of religion, where several high-profile cases involving Hindus have spawned massive discontentment. In one instance, in Selangor, Islamic religious authorities compelled a Muslim woman to undergo “rehabilitation” because she had married a Hindu, and subsequently charged her marriage to be illegal.⁶² Besides this controversial case, Malaysian authorities have also demolished Hindu temples in several states, including Selangor. These temples were demolished by government authorities on the grounds that the temples were “illegal”, further fanning ethnic Indian discontent.⁶³ The ineffectiveness of the MIC has been made more stark with the emergence of Hindraf, which masterminded the massive public demonstration of November 2007. In an attempt to curb protests, Prime Minister Abdullah gave assurances that the Malaysian government would “look into” the issue of demolition of Hindu temples.⁶⁴ Following this, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak made remarks to the effect that Hindraf was possibly a more effective a defender of ethnic Indian interests than the MIC.⁶⁵

The admission of Abdullah that the BN is likely to lose Indian support is a further manifestation of the problems looming for the MIC, whose position can hardly be said to be strengthened now that the increasingly unpopular Samy Vellu has declared that he will still contest the 2008 elections despite pressures for him to step down. The opposition DAP has already signalled its intention to seize on this opportunity when it announced that it would be fielding 30 Indian candidates, for 10 parliamentary and 20 state seats.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, “Marginalisation and the Indian community in Malaysia”, *RSIS Commentaries*, No. 137, 3 December 2007, p. 1.

⁶² “Malaysian religious law splits wife and children: Officials force apart Hindu man and Muslim woman High Court judge backs custody bid of father”, *Guardian*, 4 May 2007.

⁶³ Many Hindu temples, some of them more than a century old, were constructed across Malaysia during times when the administration and paperwork pertaining to religious sites were not as stringent as they are in contemporary times. As such, very often temples would not possess the requisite “certification” that is now required to deem them legal in the eyes of local authorities.

⁶⁴ Samy Vellu was subsequently tasked to investigate the issue and provide a report and recommendations.

⁶⁵ See, “Najib says sorry to Hindus”, *Straits Times*, 5 February 2008.

⁶⁶ “DAP to field Indians in 30 constituencies for polls”, *New Straits Times*, 11 February 2008.

DAP (Democratic Action Party)

If this election is to prove to be one that pivots on ethnic-minority issues as this paper suggests, it follows then that the DAP may well prove to be the biggest winners come 9 March 2008.

Long seen as the leader of the emaciated Malaysian opposition, the DAP lost that mantle to PAS in 1999, only to regain it in 2004 with a sound campaign and electoral performance in which it positioned itself as the protector of minority interests in the wake of the UMNO-PAS Islamization race, from which non-Muslim minorities find themselves to be, in a sense, “collateral damage”. Concomitantly, the party has signalled its intention to contest in 47 parliamentary and more than a hundred state seats, and also to introduce new faces to its line-up. In particular, the DAP has thrown down the gauntlet in Penang, and has indicated that its campaign there will focus on taking over from where the MCA and Gerakan have failed, that is, in fending off UMNO’s gradual encroachment into the state. Hampered in 1999 by its ill-fated alliance with PAS, the DAP managed to redeem itself when it campaigned in opposition to Mahathir’s declaration that Malaysia was already an Islamic state and won 12 seats in parliament. On its current form, it is likely that the DAP will at least be able to match that number, if not better it, while making significant headway in several state legislatures at the same time, most notably in Penang.

East Malaysia

Aside from Penang, Sabah is widely touted to be a major battleground in the forthcoming elections. True to the form of Sabah politics, however, much of the attention will be on how internal rivalries, both within individual parties and between BN component parties, are managed.

A total of seven BN parties will contest a mere 25 parliamentary and 60 state seats in Sabah. Indicative of subterranean rivalries that have long defined politics in the East Malaysian state, these include four Sabah-based parties—Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Pertubuhan Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Murut Bersatu (UPKO), Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRs). Aside from this slate of parties, it is also widely expected that the 2008 elections will see a significant number of independent candidates. Indeed, such is the historical animosity within the BN stable in Sabah that costly shifts in allegiances have previously taken place, such

as in 1990. Likewise, at the time of writing, an agreement among opposition parties to avoid three-cornered fights in the state continues to elude the opposition despite the exertions of Anwar. One of the key watch-points for Sabah and Sarawak will be the extent to which peninsular parties can make inroads into East Malaysia, a matter that regional parties have always been cautious towards.

On balance, the BN can expect to retain most of its seats in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, albeit with smaller majorities. This will have a significant impact on the national elections given that seats allocated to East Malaysia account for about a quarter of the seats in the Malaysian parliament.

Conclusion

While it is a forgone conclusion that the BN coalition will retain its two-thirds majority in parliament, it may lose a significant number of seats to the opposition compared to 2004. This is especially so in constituencies with large pockets of Indians and Chinese who are upset with what they perceive as the curtailing of their ethnic and religious rights. As such, it will not be surprising if opposition parties such as PKR and the DAP gain seats in the states of Penang, Perak, Selangor and Sabah. Depending on their respective performances, the election results will also likely have an impact on the party elections for UMNO and MIC, and, to a lesser extent, the MCA in the near future.

At the opposition end of the spectrum, the elections will also be an important litmus test for PAS, PKR and the DAP. For PAS, its strategy of moving away from the Islamic-state issue by focusing instead on the establishment of a welfare state will be tested. A PAS victory in urban areas with large non-Malay voters can accelerate the process of reforming the party, which it is currently undergoing. However, the real test for PAS is whether this new strategy will cost it support from the core of their supporters, the Malay voters in the northern Malay states. While PAS is likely to retain control of Kelantan, its prospects of making inroads in Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis are still unclear. If PAS is to do well in the coming elections, that is, winning in urban areas and retaining its support in the Malay heartland, it is likely that the professional group in the party led by its deputy president, Nasharuddin Mat Isa, will dominate and define the party's direction in the future. This may well lead to a discernible moderation in the Islamist commitment of the party and may even see

PAS transforming itself into a “post-Islamist” phenomenon similar to the Prosperity Justice Party (AKP) in Turkey.

The DAP is likely to emerge the biggest winner in the coming elections. Free from any formal electoral alliance with PAS, the party can easily galvanize support from the Chinese community. The question that should be posed is whether the gains that the DAP makes will be significant enough for it to emerge as the largest opposition party once again.

Finally, Anwar Ibrahim’s political future may also be defined by the results of the upcoming elections, while the PKR strategy of focusing on the need to establish a truly multi-cultural and multi-religious society is going to be tested. PKR’s multi-ethnic line-up is a step away from the racial politics that makes these elections a test of how feasible or amenable Malaysians are to a non-racialized quotient of politics. If PKR is able to galvanize enough support for its new agenda, it may actually transform Malaysian politics in a significant way.

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