

The 1999 General Elections in Malaysia: Towards a Stable Democracy?

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ABSTRAK

Di Malaysia, pilihanraya umum pada tahun 1999 telah membawa perubahan yang bermakna dari segi taburan penyokong dalam pengundian parti. Ia memberikan takrifan baru tentang pertalian di antara kumpulan sosial dengan sokongan terhadap parti. Ia juga turut menyaksikan peranan yang menonjol yang dimainkan oleh badan-badan bukan kerajaan, serta kekuatan-kekuatan sivil dan politik lain dalam masyarakat. Parti-parti yang bertanding turut membincangkan isu-isu yang serius pada pelbagai peringkat dan akhirnya parti-parti tersebut akur kepada keputusan dan menerimanya dengan tenang. Keputusan pilihanraya menunjukkan terdapat kecenderungan menggalakkan ke arah pembentukan sistem dwi-parti campuran yang memungkinkan pengukuhan sistem demokrasi di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: demokrasi, pembangunan, pilihanraya, Malaysia, parti politik

ABSTRACT

The 1999 general elections in Malaysia have brought about a significant change in the distribution of partisanship in the electorate. It redefined the relationships between social groups and party support. It witnessed an assertive role played by various non-governmental organizations and other civil and political forces in the society. The contesting parties debated serious issues at different levels and have accepted the results with grace. The results showed an encouraging movement towards a two-coalition 'turnover' system that allows for deepening democracy in Malaysia.

Key words: Democracy, development, elections, Malaysia, political parties

Elections are the essence of democracies. They provide mechanism for changing the governing officials, help legitimate a regime or maintain its legitimacy, and also provide an opportunity to a larger part of the population to influence public policies by choosing among contenders for political office. Although scholars generally accept this 'process' view of democracy, many would insist on knowing more about the conditions existing in particular countries before awarding them the accolade 'democratic' simply on this basis. They argue that

effective choice, and thus effective participation, can only occur where individual concerns can be properly articulated and pursued in the public sphere. This is a matter not only of having formally free elections, but also of sustaining pluralistic civil societies where groups flourish, and participant political cultures thrive. It is also a matter of ensuring that the rights of citizens are systematically promoted and protected. Democracies in this sense are pretty rare in human history (Fukuyama 1992). Hence, many scholars and analysts view democracy primarily in electoral terms and analyze elections to evaluate the stability or consolidation of democracy. Samuel Huntington (1999: 266-67) suggests a 'two-turnover test' as one of the criterion to judge the stability of democracy. He would examine if the initial ruling party once defeated in an election surrenders power, and then see if the successor party suffers and accepts the same fate. Larry Diamond (1998), however, would go further and examine other key components of liberal democracy including freedom of expression, association, independent press and a pluralistic civil society. Juan Linz (1997) suggests focusing on the 'political class' (the leaders and politicians). He would examine the extent to which this political class regards politics as a vocation instead of a way of making a living; its willingness to compete actively through political parties for programmatic appeals at all costs; its efforts at minimizing corrupt practices; and its refusal to "play with or use the disloyal opposition, revolutionary extremists, or putschists against opponents" (Linz 1997: 421).

Drawing insights from the above conceptual perspectives, this article attempts to examine democratic stability through studying a single electoral contest that is the 1999 general elections in Malaysia. It examines, first, the extent to which the government of Malaysia respected electoral rules during campaigning and vote counting. Next, it investigates the nature and content of campaign appeals and debates prior to elections and their implications for the emergence of a democratic culture and style of politics. Finally, it analyses the extent and meaningfulness of mass participation and what the election outcome suggests about the stability of democracy in Malaysia.

Elections are of particular importance in Malaysia where democracy is largely defined and popularly understood in 'process' terms of competitive elections and the notion of majority rule (Jomo 1996: 93). In procedural terms, however, Malaysian political system is considered narrow because it constrains the practice of civil and political rights through restrictions on assembly, the strategic use of detention orders and other legal and emergency powers. Consequently, several recent studies characterize Malaysian political system, in particular the post-1969 polity, as a fettered democracy (Muzaffar 1986), a quasi democracy (Ahmad 1989), a modified democracy (Crouch 1993) or a semi-democracy (Case 1983). Yet, the government has regularly conducted elections in order periodically to measure and reenergize their levels of mass support.

The 1999 elections were significant for two additional reasons. Firstly, this was the first general election since Prime Minister Dato Sri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad

sacked Dato Sri Anwar Ibrahim (the ex-deputy prime minister and deputy president of the ruling United Malay National Organization) from all government positions and expelled him from the party in September 1998 and imposed a ban on offshore trading of the Malaysian currency. Anwar's dismissal and subsequent jailing sparked unprecedented anti-government protests and demonstrations which drew "new actors, namely Malay women, youth and sections of the Malay middle class" (Abdul Rahman 2000: 146). Syed Hussain Ali (1999) felt that the country has been deeply divided "down to the level of the village and the family". It has also opened up divisions within the ruling party confronting the Prime Minister with his toughest challenge since some party elders broke with him in 1987. Secondly, this election witnessed the emergence of a credible opposition capable of forming a government. Four opposition parties allied to form the Alternative Front or Barisan Alternatif (BA) in the peninsula and mounted a coordinated campaign to unseat the ruling National Front or Barisan Nasional from power or, as a minimum, to deny its two-thirds majority in the national Parliament. Consequently, 1999 elections were contested vigorously by both the parties in power and those in the opposition.

THE 1999 ELECTIONS

Malaysia operates a federal parliamentary system with the king, Yang Di Pertuan Agong, as the constitutional head. It has a bicameral parliament that is composed of a 69 member largely non-elected Upper House (Dewan Negara) and a popularly elected House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat). Dewan Rakyat consists of 193 members elected from single-member districts by universal suffrage. Each of its 13 States has a legislature elected likewise. The Malaysian Constitution stipulates that the parliamentary and the state elections be held every five years. It also empowers the Prime Minister, with the consent of the constitutional monarch, to dissolve parliament and to fix the date for the elections to be held. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia's commitment to democracy at least in its electoral aspect is indicated by the fact that it has conducted nine general elections at the national and state levels with a high degree of public participation. The 9th general elections were held in April 1995.

The 10th general elections were speculated to be taking place at the beginning of 1998. The argument – largely among business circles – was that the Prime Minister would wish to seek a new mandate given the way the crisis had affected the economy. According to another analysis, elections in Malaysia usually take place in 'even-numbered' years (1974, 1978, 1982, 1986, and 1990) and all such elections have been favourable for the ruling coalition. The only odd-numbered election year was 1969, which had serious consequences for the ruling Alliance (now Barisan Nasional) and for the nation as a whole. The second analysis ruled out the possibility of having general elections in 1999.

The Prime Minister however, ruled out snap elections on several grounds. First, the government wanted to concentrate on reviving the economy. Mahathir said it would be a 'little heavy' to handle both the economy and the elections at the same time because both required full attention and time. Second, he argued that the sacking of his deputy has not resulted in 'wholesale defections' of Barisan Nasional members that would have justified a snap poll. As he explained, "this is different from 1987 where there was a substantial shift away from the government and quite a number of people joined Semangat 46" (*The Rocket*, December 1998: 20). Finally, Mahathir felt that the government still enjoyed mass support. "May be I am kidding myself but apart from a few people who are disappointed with certain things ... people generally seem to be supportive" (*The Rocket*, December 1998: 20).

Consequently, the Prime Minister waited until the economy had recovered from the severe impact of the mid-1997 economic and financial crisis. The Finance Ministry's *Economic Report 1999/2000* stated that the country's real gross domestic product (GDP) grew positively by 4.1 percent in the second quarter of 1999. It predicted that the GDP would further accelerate to an annual average rate of 7.2 percent during the second half of 1999 and a surplus of RM42 billion (US\$1.00 = RM3.80) for the current account of balance of payments (*New Straits Times*, October 30, 1999). Indeed private consumption increased gradually and there was a sharp rise in the benchmark Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange Composite Index. In this favourable circumstance, the Prime Minister dissolved the ninth national parliament effective Thursday, November 11, 1999, about five months before the expiry of its five-year term. This paved the way for the country's tenth general elections since independence, ending almost a year of intense speculation. The general elections must be held within 60 days from the date of dissolution of parliament and state assemblies. The elections were held on November 29, 1999 preceded by a nine-day campaign period. Nomination papers were received on November 20, 1999. There were 192 nomination centers and 16,396 polling stations (*New Straits Times*, November 13, 1999). The Election Commission had allocated RM55 million and 166,577 workers for the elections. The 1995 elections cost the government an estimated RM400 million (*New Straits Times*, November 13, 1999). The Commission installed special hotlines to help voters identify their polling stations. Armed forces, police and government officials serving abroad, and students overseas were allowed to cast their votes by mail.

THE CANDIDATES AND THE PARTIES

At stake in the tenth general elections were 193 parliamentary and 394 state legislative assembly seats. Compared to the 1995 general elections, this means an increase of only one parliamentary seat. The Commission also decided to use

the 1998 electoral roll which contained 9,564,071 voters, an addition of about 0.5 million voters to the 1995 electoral roll. This increase in the number of constituencies and voters was made possible through the periodic redelineation exercise carried out by the Election Commission. Article 113 (1 and 2) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution provides for an Election Commission that is empowered to conduct elections, keep electoral rolls, and review constituencies. The Constitution also contains the principle of 'rural weightage'. Thus, a rural vote counts for more than an urban vote, because, on the whole, rural constituencies contain fewer electors. The political significance of this weightage lay in the fact that it ensures a Malay domination of the system since the rural areas are predominantly Malay. Thus, the redelineation, as in the past, has increased the number of Malay majority constituencies at the expense of others and has generally favoured the ruling Barisan Nasional. The opposition parties, as usual, complained of gerrymandering and made representations to the Commission with no positive outcome.

A total of 427 candidates contested the 193 seats for the House of Representatives. Of these candidates, 193 belonged to the ruling Barisan Nasional and 205 to various opposition parties. The remaining 29 contested as independent candidates. For the 394 state legislative assemblies, various political parties nominated 814 candidates while 14 contested as independents. The Election Commission, as decided earlier, did not reject nomination papers for technical errors.

The BN alone could nominate candidates for all the parliamentary seats. Among the opposition, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS, or Pan-Malayan Islamic Party) filed the largest number of candidates with 61 for parliamentary and 238 for state assembly seats, followed closely by the Democratic Action Party (DAP) with 47 and 89 respectively. The newly formed Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan, or National Justice Party) nominated 58 for the parliamentary and 67 for state assembly seats. Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) nominated 7 candidates, four of whom vied for the parliamentary seats. It is worth noting that PAS, DAP, Keadilan and PRM formed the opposition coalition known as Barisan Alternatif (BA, or the Alternative Front) with a single manifesto, but they decided to file candidates under respective party symbols. Malaysian Democratic Party (MDP) sponsored 11 parliamentary and 8 state assembly candidates. Angkatan Keadilan Islam Malaysia (AKIM) nominated two candidates one each for state and parliamentary seats. Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS, or United Sabah Party) and State Reform Party (STAR), the two Borneo-based parties, nominated 17 and 5 candidates respectively for the parliamentary seats of Sabah and Sarawak. In Sarawak, STAR joined DAP and Keadilan to forge an electoral alliance called the Sarawak Alternative Front. The tenth elections did not involve the Sabah and Sarawak states legislative assemblies. Sabah had held its state elections in March 1999 and the term of the Sarawak state legislative assembly expires in 2001. Barisan Jama'ah Islam Malaysia (BERJASA) did not take part in state elections but did nominate

one parliamentary candidate in Kelantan. Interestingly, 152 parliamentary and 367 state seats had a direct one to one fight. There were 37 parliamentary and 27 state assembly constituencies with three candidates each, three parliamentary constituencies had four candidates each and only one parliamentary constituency was contested by five candidates.

Barisan Nasional is a coalition of 14 political parties representing important ethnic groups in the society. Malaysia's 22.2 million (1998 est.) population comprises many ethnic groups, with the politically dominant Malays forming a majority. By constitutional definition, all Malays are Muslim. More than a quarter of the population is Chinese. Malaysians of Indian descent comprise about 7 percent of the population. Non-Malay indigenous groups make up more than half of the population in Sabah and Sarawak. Given the plural nature of the society, Malaysian political leaders of various ethnic groups have opted for a 'consensus politics' through the formation of the Barisan Nasional (Mauzy 1983). Though a multi-ethnic alliance, it constitutes a party in its own right (Horowitz 1985). It has its own constitution, and in elections it behaves like a single party by putting forward a common team of candidates contesting under a common banner. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) is the dominant party in the coalition followed by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and other smaller parties. As a ruling coalition representing various ethnic groups, BN professes multiculturalism; within the coalition, each party safeguards the ethnic interests it represents. The candidates for elections are nominated, as explained by Mahathir in 1995, through the complicated process of seat sharing. The 'time-tested' formula behind the distribution of seats is that the parties will not field candidates against each other and that each will contest where it is most likely to win (*New Straits Times*, March 6, 1995). This means that the Malay majority constituencies will be contested by UMNO candidates; in non-Malay areas, the candidates would be from the MCA, the MIC or other component parties. Additionally, there is the concept of 'sacrifice' – sacrifice seats for each other, especially for those communities having no constituencies where they form a majority, as is the case with MIC. This is what Mahathir called "a situation of quid pro quo: you scratch my back, I scratch yours" (*New Straits Times*, March 6, 1995). Thus, though there is not a single constituency where Indians constitute a majority, the BN has consistently fielded MIC candidates for both parliamentary and state assembly seats. There are about five constituencies where the ethnic Indian population forms about 20 percent of the total electorate. Malays form majorities in 107 constituencies, Chinese in 46 constituencies, the non-Muslim Bumiputera (indigenous natives) in 22, and the Muslim Bumiputera (indigenous non-Malay Muslim) in 18 constituencies.

Among the opposition, PAS is a Malay-based Islamic party with a commitment to its goal of an Islamic state. It has won the support of the predominantly Muslim-Malay voters in the northern states. Recently, it has sought to reach out for non-Malay support by allowing non-Muslims to join as associate members

and to allow them to stand for elections under the PAS banner (*New Straits Times*, June 1, 1999). DAP is professedly a non-communal party with its commitment to achieve a 'Malaysian Malaysia'. It, however, is strongly identified with the predominantly urban Chinese and has difficulty obtaining support from others. Yet the party did nominate Indian and Malay candidates in the election. Parti Keadilan Nasional was launched on April 4, 1999 with Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of the former deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, as its president. According to Wan Azizah, "We want to be a bridge between existing parties. We will cooperate with all political parties that champion the cause of justice and make right the wrongs in our system" (*Asiaweek*, April 16, 1999: 21). It promised a just and democratic administration, accountability, transparency and rule of law in Malaysia and a genuine multi-ethnic and multi-religious cooperation and unity. PRM, "the most ideologically consistent and progressive" among the opposition parties (Abdul Rahman 2000: 145) is a small Malay party with socialist orientation. Its appeal is limited to a smaller group of disparate lower-middle and professional class voters. The PBS, founded in 1985, is professedly a multi-racial party. With its roots in the Christian Kadazan community, the party has attempted, with limited success, to reach out to Sabah's other ethnic groups, both Muslims and non-Muslims. Other opposition parties are small and have no major consequence to the government and politics of Malaysia.

ELECTION CAMPAIGNS: STRATEGIES AND ISSUES

Campaigning for the tenth general elections actually started long before the national parliament was dissolved. According to one report, four opposition parties had submitted 1,600 applications seeking police permits to hold small gatherings nationwide for campaigning since January 1999 and that 90 percent of these applications were approved (*New Straits Times*, November 15, 1999). Officially, however, the election campaigns started immediately after the nomination closed at 12.30 p.m. on November 20, 1999. As in all elections, the official election campaign period was short, devised arguably to reduce the level of open political competition and thus to contain ethnic sentiments from erupting into violence. The short nine-day period for campaigning, however, meant that BN with its extensive organization, its control of the media, and its massive funding, could convey its viewpoints to the electorate more effectively than any of the opposition parties. Campaigning assumed three major forms: poster wars, small group discussion (*ceramah*) or public gatherings and door-to-door campaigning.

Posters, leaflets, and billboards had been common throughout the country. The flags and banners of BN, PAS, DAP, and Keadilan were seen all over the country. BN had some 3,000 billboards ranging from 3m x 3m to 12m x 3m located strategically at roundabouts, T-junctions and along highways throughout the

country. These billboards highlighted the achievements of the BN government and exhorted the viewers to vote BN for continued prosperity. In general, however, political parties resorted to displaying posters of their candidates in the constituencies where they were contesting. Parties and candidates, however, were required to obtain a permit costing RM50.00 for putting up posters. They had to adhere to several conditions governed by the Local Government Act 1976. For instance, they were not allowed to paste posters on trees, buildings, road signs, public phone booths or streetlights. Similarly, campaign panels and structures could not be placed or erected at pathways and near shops. In any case, campaign panels and structures were placed on easily noticeable sites.

Parties also bought advertising spaces in newspapers. Once again, BN had an edge since it alone controls major media outlets in the country. Almost all the print media and the radio and television channels devoted much of their news programmes and election coverage to promoting the government's achievements and pouring scorn on the Barisan Alternatif. Over the nine-day campaign, BN bought approximately 1,000 pages of full-page advertisements in all the major local newspapers. According to Deputy Information Minister, the government-owned Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) received RM1.35 million for airing BN advertisements (*New Straits Times*, April 6, 2000). The opposition used their own bi-weeklies and monthly magazines to reach out to the people. This time around, opposition voices were heard widely as the pro-establishment dailies had lost a good number of readers many of whom had switched over to the PAS bi-weekly *Harakah*. According to a report, pro-BN Malay language dailies, *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* have lost more than 400,000 readers each in 1999. The English language daily *New Straits Times* lost almost 200,000 readers during the period 1998-1999. The readership of major Chinese dailies by and large remained unchanged (*Harakah*, October 25, 1999). Newspapers and magazines such as *Eksklusif* and *Detik* that gave a fair coverage to the opposition platform also enjoyed good sales. All these, however, pale into insignificance when compared with the BN media coverage. The BN took the campaigning one step further by placing helium filled balloons with BN logo on top of high rise structures where they could be spotted from a distance. PAS, among the opposition, followed with a couple of its own balloons several days later.

In addition, the contesting parties made greater use of the Internet to reach the voters. Many political parties created their own websites long before the elections were announced. For the opposition parties, which get little mainstream media coverage, this new medium provides access to a wider audience. UMNO and MCA have interesting and interactive websites that provide details about the party's history, programmes and major political newsbreaks. Similarly, PAS, DAP and Keadilan have interesting and well-kept websites that provide much information about party policies and programs. In addition, websites such as Sangkancil, Laman Reformasi, Free Malaysia and several others provide a medley of news updates on current affairs and a forum for debate on issues in

Malaysian politics and economy. However, the impact of the Internet on the voting pattern was marginal. First, the Internet is still new in the political arena. Second, the Internet is largely urban based and hence it is not easily accessible to the vast majority of the voters who live in the rural areas. There are about nine million voters but the total number of subscribers to Jaring or TM Net is only 650,000. Not many voters are linked to the Internet. Finally, the Internet is popular with the younger generation most of whom were not eligible to vote. The 680,000 newly registered voters claimed to be in the opposition ranks having access to the Internet were unable to vote in 1999. Yet the opposition took full advantage of the Internet to disseminate information.

The parties also used *ceramah* to reach out to and feel the pulse of the people. Most of the *ceramah* were held in open grounds, some were targeted at specific groups of about 100 to 200 people. The *ceramah* were usually held at night. But this time group *ceramah* were also held during the day. "We are also holding at least four group *ceramah* throughout the day where we will meet small group of people to enlighten them about our struggle", said one Keadilan division chief (*The Sun*, November 22, 1999). Besides *ceramah*, the candidates resorted to door-to-door campaigning. Dressed simply, the contestants visited the houses and market places, distributing free food and supplies while explaining their stands and soliciting votes. The enthusiasm and the intensity of campaigning speak a lot about the quality of democracy. The participants took the elections seriously. They spent massive amounts of money mobilizing voters and organizing polls. They showed a good deal of faith in the legitimacy of electoral politics and believed that they had a chance of retaining or gaining power through the ballot box.

Unfortunately, the main thrust of the 1999 campaign was heavily focused on personalities rather than issues. Barisan Alternatif *ceramah* hauled loads of oratory on Anwar Ibrahim, branding Prime Minister Mahathir as an oppressor, a Pharaoh. Conversely, BN *ceramahs* were replete with accusations against Anwar and adulation towards the Prime Minister. The BN started its campaign with a series of advertisements in newspapers and the electronic media. The full-page advertisements in all national dailies showed violent anti-government demonstrations by supporters of the opposition parties. The advertisements showed opposition supporters in street demonstrations, kicking and breaking the windows of a car and, throwing stones at the police. The advertisements urged Malaysians not to risk their future by voting in the inexperienced and non-visionary individuals and to support the Barisan Nasional for peace, progress and political stability. A group of 19 individuals representing the People's Manifesto Initiative Organizing Committee lodged a police report against seven newspapers, various radio and television stations and the Barisan Nasional for a 'fear campaign' against opposition political parties and the abuse of power and the mass media (*New Straits Times*, November 24, 1999). The opposition DAP secretary general Lim Kit Siang lodged three police reports against the advertise-

ments, saying they were 'inflammatory' and aimed at intimidating voters and coercing them into voting against the opposition. By portraying the opposition leaders as advocates of violence and anarchy, according to Lim Kit Siang, the BN "had committed criminal defamation and sedition offences under the Penal Code and Sedition Act for the advertisements" (*New Straits Times*, November 22, 1999). Keadilan national deputy chairman, Chandra Muzaffar, claimed that these 'threatening' advertisements by BN had made this election the dirtiest one in history. "We would like to advertise and explain the real situation to the public but we do not have the capital to do so" (*New Straits Times*, November 22, 1999). Mahathir's only comment was that the BN advertisements depicted the true story: "If we don't learn from our history and experience, we will repeat it without taking into account the possibilities" (*New Straits Times*, November 23, 1999). The Barisan Alternatif, however, did retaliate by printing posters showing Anwar's black eye, police brutalities and total insecurity under the BN government. These posters were distributed in its house-to-house campaign and were pasted on strategic places. The Barisan Alternatif spokesman Rustam A. Sani justified their action by saying: "We have to set the facts straight that the violence did not come from us. We were merely exercising our right to demonstrate" (*The Star*, November 23, 1999). The prevalence of character assassinations and in particular, 'hate politics' made this election one of the dirtiest in Malaysian history. What is more, as pointed out by one senior UMNO politician, "To be blasphemous, defamatory, libelous is just not the Asian culture" (*The Sun*, November 25, 1999). It certainly is not in conformity with the culture democracy generally promotes.

Yet all was not lost. The two major alliances also built their stand around issues of politics, economics, social services and the like. The BN campaign was based upon the theme of a "Free, United and Successful" Malaysia (Barisan Nasional, nd.). The 20-page, all-color, glossy manifesto described BN as moving towards racial harmony, social justice and prosperity of the people in the new millennium. In the foreword, the Prime Minister claimed that under BN rule, there has been political stability, economic development and racial harmony. The country remains free to form its own political and economic systems and to overcome internal and racial problems in its own way. He believed that "The November 29, 1999 election will once again give the people the opportunity to maintain, consolidate and continue the achievement in a bigger way by giving a vote of confidence to the BN" (Barisan Nasional, n.d.: 1). The manifesto pledged to continue to defend the country's independence and sovereignty; to uphold the constitution; to promote stability and to uplift the dignity of race and country. It promised further "to continue to develop the country through planning, strategy and implementation of policies which can uplift the people's prosperity at all levels towards the new millennium in line with the objectives of Vision 2020" (Barisan Nasional, n.d.: 19). The manifesto, as Mahathir pointed out, was "simple and short", which enabled the people to understand its contents with ease. In

comparison, Mahathir and other BN leaders suggested that the opposition has made rosy promises to deceive the people. They pointed out that the opposition was formed hastily just for the sake of elections. The BN highlighted major differences between PAS and DAP over many issues including that of an Islamic state in Malaysia.

Though the BN campaigned throughout the country, its electioneering effort, however, was concentrated mainly in four states: Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis and Kedah. This was to win over the simple, rural Malays who 'were vulnerable and could be easily manipulated' by the opposition leaders posing themselves as religious scholars (*ulama'*) (*New Straits Times*, November 15, 1999).

The four-party alliance, Barisan Alternatif, issued their joint election manifesto entitled 'Towards a Just Malaysia' (Barisan Alternatif 1999). It considered excessive concentration of power in the Executive, and particularly in the hands of one particular individual as the major problem confronting Malaysia. It blamed the BN administration for destroying the authority of various democratic institutions, such as the Judiciary, the Police, the Civil Service and the Media; for undermining the welfare and well-being of the Malaysian people; and, for oppression, corruption, nepotism and cronyism in the country (Barisan Alternatif 1999: 1-6). As an alternative, the manifesto promised a strong national economy, enhanced government transparency and accountability, national unity and a genuinely democratic society. It also promised to heed widespread calls for the abolition of the Internal Security Act and end the practice of detention without trial. Furthermore, it offered to establish an independent commission to review all restrictive laws (such as the Official Secrets Act, the Sedition Act, and the like) that are oppressive and violate basic human rights (Barisan Alternatif 1999: 40). It would guarantee the freedom of the media, and to limit the terms of the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers to periods not exceeding two terms. It pledged to respect the provision of special rights for the Malays, as provided for in the Constitution, but would also ensure that the poor and marginalized groups were well catered for irrespective of their ethnic, social and religious backgrounds. The Alternative government would raise the level of income exempt from income tax up to RM12,000 a year, raise children's allowances to reasonable levels, eliminate absolute poverty, end all wasteful mega projects, and modernize agriculture and increase food production in the interest of national food security and stability. Additionally, it would guarantee the autonomy of universities, strengthen scholarship, ensure comprehensive social services, raise the retirement age to 60 and maternity leave to 90 days, introduce a five-day working week and fix minimum monthly wage rate, and establish a minimum pension rate so that senior citizens can be self-sufficient (Barisan Alternatif 1999: 35).

This long 45-page manifesto was well written and articulated and was apparently addressed to the educated urbanites. The coalition partners made several joint statements, presented their own version of the national budget, and

declared their support for the jailed Anwar Ibrahim as the Prime Minister in the event of an opposition electoral victory. They even published the names of their proposed cabinet ministers with portfolios assigned. Thus, the BA projected a comprehensive alternative political agenda for the country. They told the electorate of the unique opportunity to develop a two coalition system in the country whereby the BA would be in a better position to check the abuses of the government and to present itself as an alternative government.

The coalition partners did carve out their areas for campaigning. PAS concentrated its activities in the northern states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis. According to PAS vice-president, "The real battle for PAS is in these four states, and we are prepared to face the BN there" (*The Sun*, November 19, 1999). The DAP campaign was strongest in Penang, Perak, and Federal Territory. Keadilan covered the entire country. It was more interested in capturing the parliamentary seats. PRM contested only four constituencies though it gave fullest support to the BA candidates and helped its campaign in general. The BA apparently had the support of many non-governmental organizations including Aliran, a reform movement that is listed on the roster of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Some of the leading members of these non-governmental organizations contested the elections. Well-respected Chandra Muzaffar of Keadilan is the president of the Just World Trust and he contested the Bandar Tun Razak parliamentary seat.

Among other opposition parties, only PBS needs mentioning. Its influence is confined only to the state of Sabah and largely among the Christian Kadazan community. It professes to be a multicultural organization and vows to continue the struggle as "we need to restore Sabah's dignity and rightful position in the Malaysian federation" (*The Sun*, November 20, 1999). The PBS Manifesto promised to take necessary actions to eliminate unprincipled politics; to develop a morally responsible society; and to enhance efforts aimed at establishing a working relationship with the Federal government based on trust and mutual respect for the purpose of enhancing national unity in Malaysia (*The Sun*, November 20, 1999). The BA apparently reached an agreement with the PBS and hence the contest in Sabah was largely between the PBS and BN candidates. In Sarawak, the STAR formed an alliance with Keadilan and the DAP, called the Sarawak Alternative Front, to fight the Sarawak BN candidates.

The competing parties, however, agreed on several issues. They all believed that multi-ethnic Malaysia could be governed only through a coalition of parties. The move by opposition parties to form a coalition similar to the BN is a proof of their endorsement of the need for a 'consociational' politics. Second, both the opposition and the government parties were determined not to incite their supporters to violence. The BA components even suggested taking oath in front of the King to desist from the politics of violence. Finally, and most importantly, they all agreed that they would let the ballot box decide whether Malaysia would have BN's "development with consensus" or BA's "democracy with development".

RESULTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

The elections were held as scheduled. The candidates and their supporters, according to the Election Commission, “adhered to the law and regulations” (*The Star*, November 30, 1999). Polling all over the country went off smoothly. There were no reports of untoward incidents. The average voter turnout for the parliamentary seats was 73.45%, ranging from 42.75% (P. 192 Baram constituency in Sarawak) to 88.44% (P.004 Langkawi constituency in Kedah). This is an increase of about 1.75 percentage point over the figure for 1995. The turnout was higher in the peninsula than in Sabah and Sarawak. In Peninsular Malaysia, the turnout was 75.58%. For the state assembly seats, the turnout was 75.73% (Malaysia 2000). The turnout figures compare favorably with many Western democracies as well as many ‘third-wave’ democracies.

There were 9,564,071 registered voters including 235,104 postal voters for soldiers, policemen, students and government officers overseas. To the consternation of the opposition, the polls marked another victory for the 74-year-old Mahathir who proclaimed that this would be his last five-year term as Prime Minister. The BN made a clean sweep of all the parliamentary seats in six states and retained its two-thirds majority in the parliament. The BN won 148 seats; the opposition BA and the PBS together managed just 45 seats, far fewer than the 65 needed to break the ruling coalition’s two-thirds majority (Table 1). Evidently, “the undercurrents of a sea-change in Malaysian politics” (Khoo 1999) unleashed by the Anwar factor was not strong enough to unseat the government. As Chandra Muzaffar pointed out: “the people are angry but not angry enough to put us in the governing seats” (*The Star*, December 2, 1999). The Prime Minister told his cheering supporters: “Clearly, Barisan Nasional is still the party of choice for the people of Malaysia” (*The Sun*, December 1, 1999). Yet, the 148 seats BN won was much less than the 166 it held before Parliament was dissolved. The ruling BN won 56.51% of total votes cast down from 65.14% in 1995 (Malaysia 2000). State by state analysis of the voting shows that the BN received the best support in Johor with 72.97%, followed by Sarawak with 66.47% and Sabah with 59.73% of the votes cast. In Sabah and Sarawak the BN won 45 out of 48 parliamentary seats. The worst performance was in Kelantan where it obtained only 38.91% votes and only one parliamentary seat, followed by Terengganu (41.24%) with no parliamentary seats. In Kedah, the BN won seven of the 15 parliamentary seats.

The BN Chinese and Indian partners performed well, with MCA winning 27 out of the 35 seats and MIC winning all the 7 seats it contested. It is the non-Malay, Chinese and Indian, votes that helped BN retain its two-thirds majority. The ethnic Chinese who are more involved in business, Mahathir explained, were impressed by the BN government, which had fended off a vicious attack on the economy (Mahathir Mohamad 1999). Mahathir’s visit to China and the return five-day official visit to Malaysia by Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, six days

TABLE 1. Parliamentary seats won and percent votes polled by party

Party	Seats Won	% Votes Polled
UMNO	72	29.47
MCA	28	14.06
MIC	7	2.58
Others	41	10.40
<i>Total BN</i>	<i>148</i>	<i>56.51</i>
PAS	27	14.96
DAP	10	12.73
ADIL	5	11.53
PRM	0	1.04
<i>Total BA</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>40.26</i>
PBS	3	2.15
Others	0	0.47
Independents	0	0.60

Source: Election Commission, *Keputusan Pilihan Raya Umum Malaysia Ke-10, 1999* (Results of the 10th General Elections in Malaysia, 1999) Kuala Lumpur Election Commission Malaysia, 30 November 1999). Malaysia, *His Majesty's Government Gazette*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 20th January 2000. (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2000).

to the elections, further augmented the Chinese support for the BN (*The Star*, November 23, 1999). The BN emphasis on the rights of non-Malays to equal opportunity in Malaysia's economic and political life also struck a sympathetic cord with the aspirations of large sections of the Chinese and Indian communities. The coalition's key component, Mahathir's UMNO saw its share of seats fall from 94 to 72. Four Malay cabinet ministers and the chief minister of Terengganu lost in the election. Mahathir retained his Kubang Pasu seat in Kedah but his winning margin had shrunk by about 40 percent from 1995. Most of the UMNO candidates won by slim margins (*The Sun*, December 5, 1999). The National Unity and Social Development Minister won with a majority of 803 votes and the Education Minister who is also an UMNO vice-president won with a meagre 241 votes. In constituencies where two-thirds of voters were Malays, UMNO received 48.6 percent of the votes compared to 60.8 percent in 1995. Mahathir concedes that "Apparently quite a large proportion of Malays, the indigenous people of Malaysia, have turned against UMNO, their main political party" (Mahathir Mohamad 1999). Intra-party squabbles caused by personal rivalries, the belief in the allegations of corruption and cronyism leveled by the opposition against UMNO, and perceived ill-treatment meted out to Anwar Ibrahim by

vital institutions of democratic governance explain the erosion of Malay support to UMNO. To Mahathir, however, the major cause of Malay dissatisfaction with UMNO is the economic well being of the Malay community made possible by the government's affirmative action policy. "When the Barisan Nasional Government initiated the New Economic Policy, UMNO naively believed that the mainly Malay beneficiaries of this policy would be grateful or at least appreciative of what the party, through the Barisan Nasional, had done for them" (Mahathir Mohamad 1999). To the consternation of Mahathir, the Malays did not feel obliged to UMNO in any way.

UMNO's loss of significant Malay support was clearly noticeable in the state elections (Table 2). In Kelantan, it won only 2 of the 43 seats with 39.13% of the votes cast. In Terengganu, BN won only 4 of the 32 seats with 41.4% of the votes cast. In the 1995 elections, BN had 18 and 25 seats respectively in Kelantan and Terengganu. In Kedah, the home state of the Prime Minister, BN won 24 seats, a loss of 10 state seats from 1995.

Among the opposition, the biggest winner was PAS with 27 of the 42 parliamentary seats won by the Barisan Alternatif. PAS not only retained the state of Kelantan but it also captured the neighboring, oil-rich Terengganu. In addition, it managed to secure more gains for itself in other Malay dominated states of Kedah with 40.4%, Perlis with 38.9% and Pahang with 28.3% of popular votes. Apparently PAS has been the main beneficiary of Malay dissatisfaction caused

TABLE 2. Seats won and percent votes polled in each state by party

Total number of seats: 394		Total Valid Votes Cast: 5,230,347									
Registered Voters: 7,341,040		Total Invalid Votes: 136,896									
Party	Total	BN		PAS		DAP		ADIL		Others	
State	Seats	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes
Perlis	15	12	54.00	3	39.32		0.00		6.68		0.00
Kedah	36	24	55.26	12	41.06	0	3.24	0	0.00	0	0.44
Kelantan	43	2	39.13	41	59.01	0	0.00	0	1.34	0	0.02
Terengganu	32	4	41.48	28	58.43	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.08
Penang	33	30	58.54	1	5.51	1	23.45	1	12.24	0	0.26
Perak	52	44	55.44	3	17.40	4	17.00	1	9.94	0	0.21
Pahang	38	30	54.87	6	29.10	1	9.64	1	6.27	0	0.12
Selangor	48	42	56.52	4	19.44	1	14.91	1	8.73	0	0.40
N. Sembilan	32	32	60.61	32	12.02	0	16.35	0	11.21	0	0.26
Melaka	25	21	57.41	0	13.69	4	20.30	0	0.60	0	0.00
Johor	40	40	56.53	0	25.65	0	11.22	0	6.07	0	0.54

Source: Election Commission, *Keputusan Pilihan Raya Umum Malaysia Ke-10, 1999* (results of the 10th General Election Commission Malaysia, 30 November 1999). Malaysia, *His Majesty's Government Gazette*, Vol 44, No. 2, 20th January 2000. (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia).

by the 'Anwar Ibrahim crisis'. Anwar Ibrahim is perceived by many as the charismatic leader of the Islamic revivalist movement in Malaysia which attracted young, educated Malays. With the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim, UMNO lost the support of the religious-minded young educated Malays. This together with PAS campaign for 'Islamic development' and a morally upright administration catering for the welfare of the masses was potent enough to give PAS its victory in terms of number of seats and share of the popular vote. PAS has repeatedly pointed out that under their rule the state of Kelantan (which they have been governing since 1990) has been free from corruption scandals and has managed to retain much of its Islamic culture and life style without committing its scarce resources into any form of wasteful expenditure.

DAP won 10 parliamentary and 11 state seats as against 9 parliamentary and 11 state seats it won in 1995. Contrary to all claims, DAP performed reasonably well though its tally was much less than its expected 25 to 30 seats. DAP's best performance was in the state of Penang where it secured 35.22 % of parliamentary votes. However, its national chairman Dr. Chen Man Hin, the party secretary-general Lim Kit Siang and national deputy chairman Karpal Singh lost the parliamentary and state seats they contested. While Dr. Chen believes DAP's alliance with PAS as the reason for the party's lack-lustre performance, others blame it upon the authoritarian leadership style of Lim Kit Siang. Indeed, the party suffered from internal political bickering resulting in several defections before the elections (*The Star*, December 1, 2000). Keadilan, the torchbearer of secular democratic governance, won five parliamentary and four state seats and garnered 752,255 votes in the parliamentary contest. In at least six other parliamentary constituencies, its candidates lost by very narrow margins of less than 2,000 votes. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, wife of Anwar Ibrahim and the President of Keadilan, won in her husband's constituency of Permatang Pauh, Penang. Its best performance was in the state of Selangor where it obtained 18.82% of the parliamentary votes cast. Keadilan was only seven months old at the time of elections and hence its vote mobilization machinery was not fully equipped to mount an offensive. It also did not have the financial resources of the ruling coalition. In a few constituencies where the contest was keen, vote buying and vote rigging was reported to be prevalent and decisive in determining the outcome of the elections. Mahathir had raised the question of the survivability of the new party. It seems perhaps too early to discount the party altogether. After all, Keadilan secured a very respectable 11.54% of the popular votes cast. PRM did not win any seats but it secured more votes than it did in the 1995 or 1990 elections. Interestingly, all candidates from non-governmental organizations, including Chandra Muzaffar, who contested in the elections, lost. The Sabah-based PBS won three of the 16 parliamentary seats it contested. It had secured eight parliamentary seats in the 1995 elections.

The opposition parties believe that they would have won many more seats had the elections been free and fair in the real sense of the term. They com-

plained bitterly about the name of registered voters missing from the electoral roll as well as for the names transferred from one electoral district to another without the knowledge of the affected voters. Opposition sources also alleged that some of the 680,000 unqualified registered voters were allowed to vote, presumably for the ruling party. Worse still, and for the first time in Malaysian history, the opposition parties accused the government of such gross fraudulent practices as providing ballot sheets having wax over the section devoted to the opposition and the appearance of extra ballot boxes stuffed with votes favoring the BN candidates (Kamarudin 1999: 14-15). They also reportedly received complaints from the public regarding the electoral roll. Some complained of having found the names of long dead people on the voter list; others of the existence of large numbers of 'phantom voters', that is, voters who registered with forged identity cards, to vote for the ruling coalition. Several foreign and local observer groups who monitored the general elections supported the opposition stand and complained to the Election Commission in writing about electoral malpractice. The Election Commission, however, rejected all these reports as inaccurate. Instead, it complained that these non-governmental organizations were partisan and 'supported issues raised by the Opposition' (*New Straits Times*, February 10, 2000). Such negative reporting, the Commission observed, could "disrupt and endanger the country's democratic process as well as tarnish the image of the country" (*New Straits Times*, February 10, 2000).

Despite the accusations and counter-accusations, it is reassuring to find that both the opposition and the government parties accepted the election results with dignity and grace. Mahathir began his victory conference by saying that "In an election it is always possible to lose as much as we can win, so we accept that we have lost the states of Kelantan and Terengganu We accept that because ours is a democratic country" (*The Sun*, December 1, 1999). DAP secretary general Lim Kit Siang believed that his party's poor showing was caused by many factors but it was largely due to his inability to convince the Chinese electorate that DAP joined the BA to "bring about justice, fair play and ideals for a vibrant parliamentary democracy The voters have decided and I accept their verdict" (*The Star*, November 30, 1999). For Dr. Wan Azizah, seven months old Keadilan had made a good start. The PRM chief was happy that his party had emerged stronger though it did not win any seat in the elections (*The Star*, December 1, 1999). The contestants also realized that this would not be their last campaign. Mahathir conceding the two states to the opposition was sure that "we will win it next time" (*The Star*, December 1, 1999). The PRM chief reportedly said: "We have to start planning for new elections from now by identifying new seats" (*The Star*, December 1, 1999). In short, the contestants adhered to the norms and restraints of democracy. It needs to be seen if this culture of acceptability and tolerance endures in the post-election period.

CONCLUSION

The tenth general elections in Malaysia have once again demonstrated the strength of the Barisan Nasional in the electoral arena. The electorate, however, did not give either the ruling coalition or the opposition what they wanted. The results were mixed, though somewhat favourable to the ruling coalition. The BA won 42 seats, much less than its expected 100 seats. The BN retained its two-thirds majority in parliament but with reduced seats, reduced votes and with the loss of two states, Kelantan and Terengganu, in the Malay heartland in the northeast.

The polls were conducted smoothly. However, elections have been lopsided in the sense that the media – television and radio – and the press as represented by the leading national dailies have played a totally partisan role. The major media outlets, controlled by the BN partners, gave pro-BN, anti-BA messages. The opposition received scant if any mention from the media. There have also been serious allegations of vote-buying, corruption and, for the first time in Malaysian history, of vote rigging. A comprehensive reform programme is necessary to combat all allegations of malpractice before democracy in Malaysia can be considered stable.

Yet the elections show that the Malaysian elite groups have accepted democratic procedures as the only means to bring about changes in the personnel and policies of the government. This is the strength of democracy in Malaysia. The elite groups respected electoral rules for re-delineation and vote counting. The elections elicited a high level of voter turnout and an enthusiastic participation on the part of the voters. A regrettable level of character assassinations marred the elections but they were also characterized by serious debates over issues that made the two coalitions of parties clearly distinct from each other. Interestingly, the parties reacted to the election results with dignity and decorum characteristic of participants in a stable democracy. This certainly is a good beginning but it does not rule out the possibility of turbulence in democratic governance in the post-election period.

The 1999 Malaysian general elections have marked a major turning point in the country's history for at least two reasons. First, they brought about a major change in the distribution of partisanship in the electorate. They redefined the relationships between social groups and party support. The results showed an encouraging movement towards a two-coalition 'turnover' system. BN and BA competed in the elections and offered distinct political platforms, programmes and policies to the electorate. The two-coalition or two-party system is found in many democracies from Jamaica and Guyana to the United States and Canada. Such a system would allow for deepening democracy in Malaysia. Second, the elections witnessed an assertive role played by various non-governmental organizations and other civil and political forces in the society. These civil societies braved various obstacles and persevered in asserting their role. It is ex-

tremely important for a stable democracy to have a strong and vibrant civil society. The contesting parties and affiliated civil societies made greater use of the Internet to express their dissenting views with the ruling coalition. Internet sites have increased significantly and the number of hits on the most popular ones have been tremendous. The Internet, if properly harnessed, will help propel the growth of stable social structures and institutions of democracy. In sum, the 1999 elections have taken Malaysia one step closer to mature and stable democracy.

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