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Whither Malaysia: Rethinking Ethnic Politics

By Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

Synopsis

The outcome of the 13th Malaysian general election, while not completely unexpected, reflects some trends that leaders of both the ruling and opposition coalitions must seriously consider. Top of these concerns are the ethnic and geographical divisions of the electorate.

Commentary

IN HIS post-election press conference, Prime Minister Najib Razak attributed the results of the 13th general election on 5 May to a “Chinese tsunami”, referring to the massive swing of Chinese voters away from the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN). While this is perhaps an exaggeration, it cannot be denied that the country’s Chinese have abandoned the BN.

The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) saw its 15 parliamentary seats shrink to a mere seven. MCA President Chua Soi Lek had famously warned the Chinese that the party would not join the cabinet if it did not improve its 2008 performance. This has serious implications on the consociational model that has long defined the Malaysian political system. In this model, meant to describe multi-racial societies, elites of each community can come together to rule in the interests of society because they recognise the dangers of non-cooperation.

End of consociational model?

If MCA and the other Chinese-based party, Gerakan, follow through with their decision not to join the government, the Malaysian cabinet would largely consist of UMNO and East Malaysian parties. This would spell the end of the consociational model and the start of a new phase of divisive racial politics.

The Malay votes have largely remained the same for UMNO as in 2008. However, a clear divide seems to have emerged between the urban and rural Malay voters. This rural-urban divide has also split groups based on political beliefs. Several BN stronghold seats in urban areas with Malay majorities such as Temerloh (Pahang), Kuala Trengganu (Trengganu) and Alor Star (Kedah) fell to the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR). On the other hand, PAS lost seats in the rural areas with a Malay majority such as Kuala Selangor (Selangor) and Pendang (Kedah) despite fielding the party’s heavyweights.

The urban Malay voters seemed less concerned about issues of race during the campaign period and were not swayed by the cash handouts distributed by the BN government. The PR also made gains among middle-class

Malays who were equally influenced by PR's rhetoric of change. The rural Malay voters however were more easily won over by the cash handouts by the government, while being more susceptible to government-linked television channels that raised fears the opposition would scrap the special privileges they enjoyed under the BN government.

Malaysia's future direction

There are several positive trends that have emerged from the 13th Malaysian general election. The country is now seeing the emergence of a two-party system in a maturing democracy. This is seen in the fact that the smaller opposition parties even in Sabah and Sarawak were badly trounced, a sign that Malaysians view PR as a credible opposition in the country. Malaysia's future will be dependent on the kind of politics that both BN and PR will indulge in. As Najib has made clear that there must be a national reconciliation, he is likely to reach out to the minority communities and address their concerns.

However, he is likely to also face a leadership challenge at the UMNO General Assembly later this year. His opponents would cite his failure to deliver the much coveted two-thirds majority in parliament as a sign of Najib's weakness as a leader. A new UMNO leader may not be as moderate and may start using the race card to remain in power. Since this election has shown that UMNO can win without minority support, this could be disastrous for the country.

PR's defining politics

The future of Malaysia will be also be shaped by PR's politics. While it is clear that state institutions are used unfairly against the PR, it is unlikely that any significant results could be achieved from the current protests planned by PR leaders. Anwar Ibrahim's refusal to accept the results of the polls might push the country towards instability. The opposition leader would need to focus instead on building a coalition of younger leaders from the three opposition components - PKR, DAP and PAS - to lead their PR alliance and set his sight on winning the next general election.

The PR component parties, especially the DAP, will have to tread carefully and not be seen to be pushing for the agenda of the minority communities. The PR's current strategy of advocating a Malaysia where national identity supersedes ethnic and religious affiliations is an important one which should be adhered to by all the component parties. The political posturing of the BN and PR over the next few months will likely determine whether the country's politics will become more or less ethnic-centric.

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