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## The Future of the Malaysian Opposition

Mohamed Nawab Mohd Osman \*

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*THE RECENT* defeat of the National Justice Party (PKR) in the Ijok by-election has cast doubt on the future of Anwar Ibrahim and the Malaysian opposition. Many political commentators believe that the Ijok by-election spells the end of Anwar's political career. Others go a step further to predict the end of the Malaysian opposition parties. While this remains to be seen, a closer scrutiny of both elections reveals some interesting trends emerging within the Malaysian political scene.

### Anwar Ibrahim and the Future of PKR

Both the Ijok and Machap by-elections may have diminished somewhat the former deputy premier's political clout, which is a factor in Malaysian politics. These by-elections were regarded as a test of whether Anwar's call for change and *reformasi* has resonance with the electorate ahead of the general elections likely to be held as early as this year. In both by-elections, Anwar failed to sway the voters away from the Barisan Nasional or National Front (BN) government. Meanwhile, his PKR is not likely to make any major breakthroughs in the coming general elections. Its inability to transform itself as a multi-racial party means that it is not likely to gel with the non-Malay voters. In addition, Anwar's move to distance the party from the New Economic Policy (NEP), calling for its abolition, is extremely unpopular with Malay voters as could be seen in the Ijok by-election. Ijok and Machap have shown that Anwar's attempt to play all sides and satisfy the demands of the different parties did not work. While it is too early to dismiss Anwar given the important role he has played in Malaysian politics, these election results are an indication that he is not likely to be the next Prime Minister of Malaysia by becoming leader of the Malaysian opposition. The only option left for him is to re-join UMNO. Anwar remains a popular figure in UMNO and many of his supporters are still in UMNO. As such, despite Anwar's dismissal of such a possibility, this option remains open for him.

### Democratic Action Party (DAP)

The Ijok and Machap by-election results also seem to indicate that many Chinese voters are supporting the opposition. In Machap, the DAP managed to reduce the margin of BN's victory, while in Ijok a large number of Chinese cast their votes for PKR. In a way, the swing of Chinese votes is not surprising given that various incidents have created uneasiness amongst the Chinese about their rights in Malaysia. The actions of Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, the UMNO Youth chief, wielding and kissing a *keris* at the Youth assembly last year caused unease among non-Malays, who saw it as a call to arms by Malays against other groups. Other issues such as the enforcement of compulsory headscarves for policewomen, including non-Muslims, and the curtailment of the religious rights of non-Muslims are making the Malaysian Chinese increasingly uncomfortable with the BN government. These trends indicate that the DAP is likely to gain more support from the Chinese populace and

may gain some seats in Chinese-dominated areas.

### **The Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS)**

The Malay voting pattern in Ijok also seems to signify that other Malay parties including PAS are likely to retain their support among their key supporters. It is not likely that PAS will improve its position and support in states like Selangor or Johor, considered strongholds of UMNO. However PAS may make inroads in the northern Malay states of Terengganu and Kedah. Divisions in UMNO Kedah over former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed's issues with his successor Abdullah Badawi is likely to have a negative impact on the party in Kedah. His call for voters to send a message to the BN during the Ijok by-election was the first time that Dr Mahathir had implicitly urged voters to vote for the opposition. This is likely to further split the party in Kedah and work to the advantage of PAS.

In Terengganu and Perlis, the marginal votes won by UMNO in many of the seats are likely to benefit PAS. More important for PAS is the question of how the party will position itself in the next general elections. The party's emphasis on the Islamic State issue will be a litmus test for many non-Muslims. While Chinese voters are getting disillusioned with UMNO, this may not translate into votes for PAS, especially in seats where their votes often determine the outcome of the results. As recently as March, the party chief, Datuk Seri Hadi Awang, once again urged non-Muslim Malaysians to support an Islamic state. If the reformist group in PAS, led by its deputy president, Nasharuddin Mat Isa, successfully steers the party away from the Islamic State issue, it is likely that PAS will be able to take advantage of the unhappiness of non-Muslims in Malaysia. PAS' recent overtures to the non-Malays such as their support for Chinese Muslims in Malacca to build a mosque with Chinese architecture despite UMNO's opposition has created a sense that PAS appreciates diversity in the expression of different cultures. This may allow the party to garner some support for itself.

In essence, the by-election results in Ijok and Machap should be studied carefully by all political parties in Malaysia. While the results could be seen as a victory for the BN in marginalising Anwar Ibrahim for now, Chinese and Malay votes may swing towards the opposition in the coming general election to the advantage of DAP and PAS.

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