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POLITICS, PLURALISM AND THE POLLS: A CHANGING SCENARIO?

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The March 8 general election in Malaysia is significant in many ways. It is also about an old rivalry between Abdullah Badawi and Anwar Ibrahim and what they represent. Both have much at stake. Abdullah will succeed if Anwar fails to deny the ruling coalition a two-thirds majority. If Anwar succeeds, it could start a new approach to managing race and religion.

MALAYSIA's coming general election will either lead to more of the same in politics. Or it may set in motion some long-term changes in the approach to race, religion and the whole question of how to run an ethnically and religiously diverse society.

While the significance of *Pilihan Raya Umum*, or General Election 2008, can be read in many ways, one less obvious dimension is the old rivalry between two key personalities – Abdullah Badawi and Anwar Ibrahim – and what they respectively represent.

Abdullah and Anwar: Contending approaches

At the core, both leaders embody the politics of moderation in a plural society; they draw from the same wellspring of centrist Islamic values of *wasata* or *wasatiyah* which upholds the “middle way” principles of Islam. *Wasata* is accommodationist, universalist and humanistic in essence which accords respect for all regardless of race or creed.

Prime Minister Abdullah is defending the status quo in the politics of moderation, which is now under stress. Anwar, informal leader of the opposition, promises a new approach to the same thing -- but through the opposition route. He seeks to build a viable alternative to the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) by reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable pillars of the Malaysian opposition spectrum -- one Islamist and Malay-based (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or PAS) and the other secularist and Chinese-based (Democratic Action Party or DAP).

Abdullah is also defending his reputation. This general election may confirm criticism that he is at best

a one-term prime minister. Or it may prove that he is capable of surprises -- and therefore long-term leadership -- in the same way the 2004 elections he won for BN stumped many with its unprecedented victory.

For Anwar, 2008 may prematurely end his future as a political leader, even before he can make a formal return. Or it will point to what he claims is a new dawn for him -- and for Malaysian politics. For decades, Abdullah and Anwar have had a cool relationship, despite both coming from the same state of Penang, and both originating from the same wellspring of *wasata* values, which moulded their original image as Islamic leaders.

New Cosmic Battle

For Anwar, this general election is the beginning of a new cosmic battle to re-make Malaysian politics – ironically not unlike the one in the 1950s when the founder of UMNO, Onn Jaafar, tried but failed miserably. Anwar’s battle begins with his own re-invention as a political leader, and with the tough but necessary struggle to revive the shaky opposition coalition called the *Barisan Alternatif (BA)*.

Notice two things: First, Anwar’s metamorphosis from an Islamic leader and then Malay nationalist into a universalist all-embracing politician claiming to represent all groups. Second, the creeping compromises made by the erstwhile ideological nemesis, the DAP and PAS. It is a mistake to dismiss these less-than-subtle changes as political gimmickry.

Despite all the talk about Anwar eventually returning to UMNO, the mutual rejection between him and his former party means there is no other way to become prime minister except the alternative route. Elections 2008 is but only his first step. It is part of a series of elections that he must fight, and win, if he is to return to power – which is an uphill task, if at all possible.

So what will make a successful general election for the two old nemesis? For Abdullah, he may lose many seats, but success will be redeeming enough if he captures Kelantan – the only state still in opposition hands. Or if he snatches away Permatang Pauh, Anwar’s long-standing – and his party’s sole -- parliamentary seat now defended by his wife. The fall of Permatang Pauh in Penang could deal a symbolic, even severe blow to Anwar’s political comeback.

A “semi-1969” scenario?

For Anwar, success is to secure anything between 35-40 seats – or about half the 75 seats that will deny the Abdullah-led BN a two-thirds majority.

Officially, the opposition says it wants to repeat 1999 when it pulled the best showing in the wake of Anwar’s sacking in 1998. The now re-energised opposition is again talking about denying the BN a two-thirds majority. This is a pipedream because the BN is too entrenched to take this lying down. Even in the best of years in 1999, the opposition failed to deny the BN that control. I suspect the real opposition target this time is to capture half of that decisive number for 2008 – or 37 seats.

This will be enough to create a psychological threshold, which could then trigger a “1969 scenario” in which major policies are eventually reviewed. In 1969, the Opposition successfully denied the ruling Alliance its two-thirds majority, leading to major policy shifts such as the creation of the larger BN coalition, and the introduction of the New Economic Policy and the nation-building principles of Rukunegara.

A 2008 general election in which the opposition wins half its target of denying the BN its two-thirds majority, yet triggering a longer-term change of policies or realignment of politics is what I call the “semi-1969 scenario”.

In 2004, when the BN under Abdullah pulled its best showing, the opposition won 20 seats. So in 2008, the opposition needs to win between 17 to 20 more seats to secure that psychological breakthrough. This is not too far-fetched a goal given the current anti-government mood amongst the all the major communities – Chinese and Indians, even the Malays. I would regard as an opposition failure if it cannot win 30 parliamentary seats – or 10 more than in 2004.

New formula under severe test

A psychological victory will embolden the opposition for a stronger showing at the next general election five years from now. By then, Anwar will become a bigger threat to the BN as a formal opposition leader. Even PAS, increasingly entering what some call the “post-Islamist” phase, has become more realistic and accepting of political cooperation with both the Chinese-led DAP and the Malay-led People’s Justice Party (PKR), Anwar’s own party.

Most critical now is Anwar’s attempt at non-communal politics. This has never been tried before by any Malay leader since the disastrous experiment by Onn Jaafar to open up UMNO to all races 50 years ago. Going by history, Anwar’s challenge is humongous. But if the BA under him makes inroads, performs better than in 2004 and sustains it for the next two elections, it will sow the seeds for the emergence of a viable two-coalition system and realign the system.

There is one big difference this time. The Anwar-led opposition coalition is pushing for a “new” approach to politics that is not fixated with the goal of an Islamic state, or the supremacy of Malay rights, while offering to embrace all the minorities, yet will need a “middle way” Malay/Muslim leadership to be viable. It is a new formula that is being floated, and will now be severely tested.

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