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ENTER THE BADAWI ERA: Implications of Malaysia's General Election 2004

Yang Razali Kassim *

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The Barisan Nasional's resounding victory in the Malaysian general election on 21 March 2004 has given a strong mandate to Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, five months after succeeding Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the post. It has also strengthened his position as leader of the dominant party in the BN, UMNO, which will confirm him as its president at the forthcoming general assembly in June. In the process he has narrowed the deep fissures in the greater UMNO family, which was split over the dismissal and disgracing of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and which brought about the reverses suffered by UMNO and BN in the 1999 election. With his leadership and personal campaign, the BN and UMNO won back the Malay voters who had defected en masse to the Opposition then, and, even more significantly, turned back the "green tide" of PAS, the Islamic Party, in the northern states of peninsular Malaysia.

The BN did far better than anyone could imagine in getting 198 or 90% of the 219 seats in parliament, recapturing the state of Terengganu and almost defeating the PAS government in Kelantan, besides crushing the opposition parties in the other states. Abdullah could take satisfaction in the symbolic toppling of PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang and several other conservative PAS clerics by UMNO candidates who stood for his concept of progressive Islam, *or Islam Hadhari*. But amid the defeat, PAS' share of the popular vote actually showed a marginal rise to 15.8% from 15% in 1999.

Although opposition parties have charged that the electoral process was flawed and the Election Commission had, by all accounts, mismanaged the voter registration and polling procedures so as to make the elections suspect, the results of the 2004 election mark a significant chapter in Malaysia's political history. PM Abdullah's sweeping success in reversing the Malay defection from UMNO that took place under Dr Mahathir's leadership, reflected the loss of popularity and even rejection of the former PM in the twilight of his 22 year-long stewardship of the country. General Election 2004 marks the beginning of the Abdullah Badawi era, but what are its implications?

Triumph of secularism over political Islam?

A significant outcome of GE 2004 was the re-ordering of the political landscape that was already being altered by the growing influence of Islam in politics and society. Much has been said about the "greening" of the country and the rise of political Islam, *ala* Pas. It is true that the "green tide" of PAS has been rolled back by the "blue wave" of the BN. Ballots, not bullets, have displaced PAS as leader of Opposition. And in its place, the secular, Chinese-

based DAP, has been returned to its previous role – one it played so stridently from the 1960s through the 1980s. While this means that the rise of PAS has been checked -- for now – GE 2004 may have also brought back the communal divide of old, pitting mainly ethnic Chinese political interests against Malay political power. But the DAP, eager to remake itself, has portrayed the changed political equation in post-Sept 11 terms: GE 2004 marked the rise of secular politics to halt the advance of political Islam in a plural Malaysian society.

Such a triumphalist view is an over-simplification of a complex scene. PAS may have been checked, but it is far from dead; to the party, the election was but only a temporary setback in its long struggle to achieve an Islamic state through the ballot box. Indeed, the slight rise in its share of the popular vote underscores a resilient core of supporters in the Malay heartlands. Besides, while UMNO may have captured 55 % of the votes in the Malay-majority areas, up from 43 % in 1999, the fact is that 45 % remains loyal to PAS. PAS is after all a legitimate party in a system that is by and large democratic. If PAS is quick to learn the lessons from the recent polls and remakes itself to become more acceptable to the general population, it will bounce back. The question is whether it can indeed reform, and under what type of leadership. This will depend on the outcome of the internal dynamic between the conservatives and the reformists within the party – one which will be accentuated over the next five years.

But it is not wrong to say that, notwithstanding the setback faced by PAS, “political” Islam will continue to be on the ascendancy in Malaysia – just that it will be the UMNO version. So, instead of an Islamic state as an end goal, there is “Islamic governance” – *Islam Hadhari* - which emphasises the universal substance and principles of Islam, such as justice, equality and fairplay, and less in terms of form, legal trappings and political structure. In short, it is “progressive Islam” that emphasizes development, knowledge and plurality. But, to be sure, PAS’ agenda also encompasses Islamic governance – which Hadi Awang, in an interview with IDSS, calls *Hadharah Islamiyah*. So it is a mistake to view PAS’ brand of political Islam as devoid of the same universal substance, or of being anti-development, or anti-modern. Otherwise it would not have been able to attract professionals in increasing numbers. The truth is that, largely due to its literal and formalist approach to the issue of the Islamic state, PAS lost the public relations battle to the more sophisticated UMNO and BN, with the help of the partisan media and a nervous non-Malay community post-Sept 11.

More importantly, the huge mandate won by Mr Abdullah is also an endorsement of UMNO’s *Islam Hadhari* platform by the multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. What this means is that while the political march of PAS has been rolled back, a more Islamic society is an increasing reality in Malaysia – both on the ground and in the corridors of power. But it will be a society that non-Malays and non-Muslims are more at ease, and can come to terms, with, led by an essentially Malay nationalist party that has become increasingly Islam-conscious as well.

If this is what the majority wants, then Mr Abdullah has to deliver, or lose the crucial Malay vote again come the next general election. In a country where the demographic trend shows the Malays, who are mostly Muslims, increasing in numbers while the non-Malays are declining, no leader can afford to ignore this fact. But the long-term picture is one of a country where the Muslims and non-Muslims will live in mutual accommodation. If Mr Abdullah succeeds to advance his *Islam Hadhari* programme and is not seen as merely using it to win votes, UMNO will be further strengthened. In the long-term, UMNO in the Badawi era will be a more effective moderating influence on the Malay mind and engender the

growth of an inclusive Malay/Muslim majority. PAS, on its part, will be forced to reform or remake itself to remain relevant. This should not be ruled out because despite its negative portrayal in the media as a fundamentalist party, PAS has historically shown a capacity to adapt.

But while it is a fact that UMNO has won, PAS has not really lost. If its goal was a more Islamic government than an Islamic state, then PAS has clearly achieved this in the form of a more Islamic UMNO, albeit one that blends Islam with *assabiyah* or (Malay) nationalism. But because UMNO is the more dominant, it will be the one that sets the tone and texture of Islam in Malaysia, not PAS. This in turn will have a spill-over influence on the type of Islam that will evolve in the Southeast Asian region, and in the larger Muslim world, because of Malaysia's stature as one of the most developed Muslim economies in the world.

Impact on UMNO

While it is true the Abdullah persona was a key factor in the BN's clean sweep, *Islam Hadhari* cannot be underplayed in giving UMNO the new lease of life it badly needed after the humiliation of 1999. Mr Abdullah simply cannot afford to forget this. Yet, the new prime minister knows very well that a huge mandate at the general election is not a guarantee the Malays will always be solidly with him. The UMNO rank-and-file has a tradition of independent-mindedness. This is both a strength and a weakness. While the tradition gives the party a built-in mechanism for checks-and balances and burnishes its credentials as a democratic party, it is also a source of periodic instability. Indeed, UMNO's history over the last two decades is marked by a paradox: UMNO is at its most vulnerable when it is strongest because a leadership struggle tends to follow its electoral successes.

Apart from consolidating the party and putting his own imprint on the "post-Mahathir era", Mr Abdullah's most crucial hurdle is the coming UMNO party elections later this year. With a huge mandate to his credit, Mr Abdullah will logically be undisputed as the new party supremo. But is his position as secure as it seems? He is not really a political animal and does not believe in power-building. He has always preferred to be above the fray of UMNO politics. That is why he is popular, even during his lowest point after the 1987 split. But unless he quickly translates his huge mandate into a power base, his advisers fear, he may be easily challenged. And the only one with the clout to mount a challenge is Najib Tun Razak, the deputy prime minister and defence minister, though he has repeatedly declared his loyalty to Abdullah as PM. Indeed, in a recent interview with the writer, Mr Najib expressed irritation at those who continued to cast doubts on his intentions. Mr Abdullah's camp has been conscious of his vulnerability. Interestingly in the run-up to the polls, his men had begun moves to help tighten his grip. In the name of reunifying the Malay ranks, peace talks were held with Anwar's supporters, especially those in Keadilan. According to those who attended such talks, Mr Abdullah touched on the importance of strengthening his position so that he could work towards the eventual release of Anwar. This strategy worked on some Keadilan leaders, but not on others who demanded a firm time-table for Anwar's release

The premier's key support comes from the former "Team B" network – the faction that clashed with Dr Mahathir in 1987. The notable figures in this network comprises Musa Hitam and Shahrir Samad – the latter being the best performer in the recent polls. Another key ally is Muhyiddin Yassin. All are from the stronghold state of Johor, which has a big interest in how ties with Singapore are managed. The outcome of the coming party elections therefore will be defined by, among other things, how the Abdullah-Muhyiddin camp can maintain its edge over the Mahathir-backed Najib wing. The dynamic between the two sides,

in turn, will depend on how aggressively Mr Abdullah pushes ahead with his declared agenda to crack down on corruption. His pre-election move to bring corruption charges against Eric Chia over the Perwaja Steel case and Kasita Gaddam, a Barisan minister, had clearly won the approval of the voters. It had also impressed opposition leaders because Chia is widely regarded as a powerful corporate player with his close relationship to Dr Mahathir. But the crackdown on Chia did not cheer Mahathir loyalists who saw it an affront to the former premier himself. Such undercurrents could influence UMNO delegates in the coming party elections.

Impact on PAS

GE 2004 was also a major test for Hadi Awang, who took over the PAS presidency upon the death of his predecessor, Fadhil Noor. While his party's massive loss can be read as an indictment of the Hadi leadership, it would be premature to conclude that the polls defeat will lead to his exit. Indeed, the serious setback will force PAS to reform itself, and the man who is in the best position to do so, ironically, is Mr Hadi himself. The real Mr Hadi, according to party officials from the reformist wing, is not the radical extremist the media has made him out to be, but a pragmatist who has shown a readiness to be more open and inclusive to advance the party's cause. It is under his watch that a Chinese wing called the PAS Supporters Club has emerged, led by a Western-trained financial consultant and self-professed Christian, Alex Ong. Despite the massive defeat, support for PAS among the east coast Chinese has actually grown partly as a result of this fledgling club, according to Mr Ong. During the hustings, members of this club, who are by and large Chinese, proudly walked around in T-shirts that read "PAS OK". This development was however neutralised by the BN in the final days of the campaign when it used the standard scare tactics of taking out advertisements in the Chinese media that linked PAS to the temple-destroying *Taleban*. PAS officials however say more temples have emerged in the east coast under PAS rule than under UMNO and BN.

Mr Hadi is likely to use the party's surprising defeat to argue with the conservative wing led by the ulamas, or clerics, for change and reform in the party. Indeed, the polls results will give more room to the professionals and reformists, key figures among whom are Kamaruddin Jaafar, Dr Dzulkipli Mohamad, Dr Hassan Ali, Mustafa Ali and Mafudz Omar. All except Kamaruddin, were routed at the polls. PAS conservatives take a purist approach to politics. Their thinking is premised on the belief that as an Islamic political party, it is sufficient for PAS to focus on and win over the Malay/ Muslim ground on the platform of an Islamic state. Once this majority ground is won over, the other communities will go with the flow and desert the BN. The professionals and pro-reform leaders, many of whom come from a secular background, however believe that this is not enough and that PAS must behave like a political party if it sees itself as one. This means it must reach out to the entire population, not just the Malay/Muslim majority, so as to be representative of all groups. To succeed, however, PAS must compromise and accept some form of accommodation with the non-Malays and non-Muslims so that its Islamic agenda will be more acceptable to them. Hadi Awang, according to some of the pro-reform PAS officials, has the capacity for pragmatism and the acceptability to both sides to bridge the two schools of thought. Indeed, he is trying to do so. Whether he succeeds or not, the defeat of PAS under his watch means he will have to depend more on the reformist wing in the coming years. But for sure, PAS will be around for a long time -- which makes it crucial for others to avoid a simplistic or stereotyped understanding of the party.

Conclusion

Malaysia is clearly in a state of change and transition even though GE 2004 has entrenched the system of consensus and accommodation that has so dominated the country's politics since Independence. By confirming its pre-eminence, the ethnically-inclusive Barisan Nasional coalition has overcome a serious threat to its viability caused by the 1999 split within UMNO. The Malay revolt in that year had almost eroded the party's position as the epicenter of political power. Had UMNO failed to win back the lost ground at the March 21 polls, the party's central role within the BN could have come under serious question.

That would have raised two serious prospects: the first is the overshadowing of UMNO by the combined strength of the non-Malay parties, namely the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Gerakan and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) within the ruling coalition. This could in turn, UMNO insiders fear, lead to the re-emergence of Malay insecurity, and the possibility of a "May 13" scenario. The second prospect is the rise of PAS as the new epicenter of Malay political dominance. A shift in the Malay balance of power to PAS arising from a weakening of UMNO may then cause the MCA, Gerakan and MIC to abandon UMNO and join the *Barisan Alternatif*, the alternative coalition led by PAS and Keadilan. Indeed, such an eventuality has been in the long-term calculation of PAS, according to Mr Hadi, in the pre-election interview with IDSS. But his idea was promptly dismissed by MCA, Gerakan and MIC.

As it turned out, GE 2004 made both prospects academic. Malaysia is back to its status quo. But it does not mean that the undercurrents of change have stopped flowing in this crucial phase of transition. The Badawi era may be as dramatic as the Mahathir years and the road to the next general election, due by 2009, just as full of surprises as GE 2004.

*Yang Razali Kassim is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies who was in Malaysia recently to observe the general election.