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MALAYSIAN POLITICS: WHERE TO AFTER THE ELECTORAL SHOCK?

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The outcome of the 8 March general election in Malaysia has been tectonic. The deep inroads made by the opposition at the expense of the formidable Barisan Nasional coalition have taken many by surprise. The post-election situation is still fluid. More surprises may be in store, including the durability of the government.

THE POSSIBILITY of Anwar Ibrahim becoming prime minister is getting less and less remote. It may happen by the next Malaysian general election in 2012 or 2013. Or it may happen sooner, if UMNO and the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), fail to recover quickly from the shock of General Election 2008 and there are significant defections from BN.

This is the mind-blowing upshot of the 8th March political earthquake in Malaysia which shook to the core the powerful and once unbeatable BN. Mind-blowing because it was only days ago that the former deputy prime minister's political future had been summarily dismissed, yet again, by BN stalwarts.

Having successfully denied BN for the first time its two-thirds majority in the new parliament, Anwar is now in a position to snatch away the right to form the government. With 82 seats out of 222, he is actually 30 seats short of a simple majority. The Malaysian electoral system does not require MPs who switch parties to resign their seats. Anwar's visit to East Malaysia earlier this week is therefore noteworthy. Should Anwar succeed in wooing over 30 new BN MPs, he will have the numbers – 112 -- to form the government. The BN will be forced out of power and consigned to the opposition for the first time in modern Malaysian history.

Then again, Anwar is not likely to succeed in throwing the BN out. But this is not the point. The political system has been so shaken by the recent election that a change of government is no longer a far-fetched possibility -- or a figment of the imagination.

System in a flux

UMNO, the pillar of the BN, is not likely to take this prospect lying down, of course, as dazed as it is now. Too much is at stake. It is also difficult to accept, having been in power for 40 years. The possibility of losing power will be too daunting that we should expect counter-moves from UMNO -- as is happening now.

That is why over the last few days, there has been denials in the media – from both sides -- about possible cross-overs. If Anwar is in a position to woo over BN members, UMNO too can play the game. Indeed, UMNO will have no choice but to pull out all the tricks it knows, for it is now a matter of survival.

The upshot of this all is a political system in a flux. Malaysian politics has entered a new era.

Significantly, the big first step into this era on 8th March has been riot-free. If this peace holds, historians in future will mark this down as the most momentous change thrown up by the election. The first and only other time the ruling coalition lost its two-thirds majority in 1969, ethnic riots followed. The gloating by the minority Chinese community worsened the sense of insecurity of the majority Malays, leading to clashes.

That was why, as soon as it was clear that the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the People's Justice Party (PKR) had swept to power in the state of Penang, DAP leader Lim Guan Eng swiftly urged party members to avoid victory parades. BN leaders, especially UMNO leaders, must also be commended for taking the massive losses in their strides, painful as they were. What we saw was the maturing of Malaysian society. This will set the tone and tenor as the system and its players sort out the many uncertainties during this crucial post-election phase.

Political fundamentals under stress

For a long time, the Malaysian political system has hinged on some fundamentals. The first is power-sharing amongst the major races, around which the entire country revolves. Power is shared on the premise of *ketuanan Melayu* or Malay political dominance, in exchange for citizenship for the earlier generation of immigrant Chinese and Indian communities. This arrangement in 1957 gave rise to the Alliance coalition of different race-based parties such as the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), with UMNO at the core.

Following the 1969 riots, the Alliance was later expanded to become the 14-party strong BN or National Front, which includes Gerakan. The New Economic Policy of affirmation action was introduced to placate Malay fears, and the five national principles of Rukunegara were put in place to foster national integration.

For 40 years, UMNO ruled the country by sharing power with the representatives of the ethnic communities, namely MCA, MIC and Gerakan. Cabinets are formed on the basis of ethnic representation, with each community allocated a quota of seats. The 2008 election has however thrown the BN-based coalition system into a flux. With many BN ministers from the Chinese and Indian parties defeated at the polls and losses among UMNO ministers as well, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is at a loss as to how to maintain the balance in cabinet.

For UMNO, at stake now is not just *ketuanan Melayu* but also the NEP, a strategic roadmap to fulfill bumiputra aspirations for economic balance with the other races. One of the key platforms of the Anwar-led PKR is the review or dismantling of the NEP, which Anwar has criticized for having fallen to abuse. Khalid Ibrahim, the new chief minister of Selangor which PKR leads, has said he will now

act on the PKR's promise on the NEP. The seriousness of the PKR, and the DAP, to do this has begun to sink within UMNO, which has warned the opposition against marginalizing Malay interests. Undoing the NEP will be a tricky task. How the NEP is handled, or mishandled, can unravel the peace that we now see.

A new model in the making?

More fundamentally, there is now the possibility of a two-coalition system. Rivalling the BN is the potential rebirth of *Barisan Alternatif* (Alternative Front or BA) comprising the PKR, DAP and the Parti Islam se-Malaysia or PAS. (Lately, the BA has also been informally referred to by some as the Barisan Rakyat or People's Front.) This alternative front is fundamentally different from its predecessor BA, formed at the height of the Anwar sacking in 1998; the DAP left it following differences with PAS over the issue of the Islamic state.

The BA is now led neither by PAS nor DAP but the PKR, which is multi-racial, though Malay-based. The new BA, if formalized, is fixated with neither the goal of an Islamic state, nor the NEP, nor Chinese education. This emerging "politics of the middle ground" in the opposition is just as significant. More broadly, we are seeing for the first time two opposing coalitions -- one barely in power, led by Abdullah, and another styling itself as the "government-in-waiting", led by Anwar. Both have multi-ethnic representations, and both have Malays and Muslims at the core. The difference is that the BN coalition is race-based while the emerging BA coalition claims to be not. But the formula of power-sharing continues.

This PKR-DAP-PAS coalition model is a new creature thrown up by the 2008 general election. It is now being tested out in the four opposition-controlled states other than Kelantan – namely Perak, Kedah and Selangor, and to a lesser extent Penang. Unsurprisingly, this model is proving to be tenuous and conflict-prone as its partners grapple with adjusting to the new reality.

But if the opposition can make it work, the BA may succeed in offering itself as the alternative coalition at the federal level. Should Anwar succeed in wooing over new MPs to achieve the simple majority, the BA will be the new vehicle to rule the country – unless it unravels before it achieves its goal.

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