



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 075/2013 dated 25 April 2013

Malaysia's GE13: A Cliff-hanger Election

By Joseph Chinyong Liow

Synopsis

There is no doubt that Malaysia's 13th general election will be a cliff-hanger. It is a battle for survival by two leaders who, despite their bitter rivalry, are actually cut from the same cloth.

Commentary

CAMPAIGNING FOR Malaysia's 13th general election began on Saturday 20 April 2013, and there is no doubt that it will be a closely fought affair. The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN or National Front) will emphasise the themes of stability, continuity and economic growth, while the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR or People's Alliance) will mobilise around issues of corruption, cost of living and minority rights.

To a large degree, however, this election is a personal struggle between two charismatic politicians. Prime Minister Najib Razak is looking for a mandate after being appointed to his post by the ruling coalition in 2009. The indefatigable Anwar Ibrahim leads the opposition in hopes of overcoming the various obstacles placed in his way since he was dismissed as deputy prime minister in 1998. Polling day, 5 May, will be the last stand for one of these men.

Struggle for survival

Najib came to power after his predecessor, Abdullah Badawi, failed to win BN's customary two-thirds control of parliament in 2008. Since then the prime minister has played a double game. He has tried to outflank the reformist opposition by repealing security laws and introducing his comprehensive Economic Transformation Programme which aims to catapult Malaysia into the ranks of the high-income countries.

At the same time, and despite his calls for a harmonious "One Malaysia," the prime minister has placated his party's ethnic Malay base by protecting pro-Malay affirmative action in government, business and education. While Najib has adopted the outward trappings of a dynamic, youth-courting reformer, results have been mixed. Malaysia's export- and resource-driven economy grew by 5.6% in 2012, but ambitious economic policies have yet to bear fruit.

The economy continues to rely heavily on subsidies, which will have long-term repercussions on national debt and will likely pose considerable obstacles to economic transformation. Economic liberalisation plans have

inevitably run up against entrenched racial preferences, for instance in the property development market, where ethnic Malays still command discounts, and in higher education, which continues to operate on a quota system.

Najib's political triangulations

BN's hope is that Najib's political triangulations have kept him popular enough among young people and minorities to stave off the opposition alliance. While his supporters claim he can regain two-thirds control of parliament, few independent analysts believe this is likely. A stalemate is more likely, with some seats changing hands and BN barely retaining power.

In this scenario, Najib will at best be forced to govern from a position of weakness for the next five years, lacking a strong mandate to push through reforms. Or he might lose his post altogether.

Although Najib remains personally popular—his approval rating hovers around 65%—leadership defenestrations have become a regular feature of BN politics. Najib knows this better than anyone, having benefitted from the ouster of Abdullah. Outright electoral defeat for the ruling coalition would almost surely mean Najib's departure from the political scene.

The prime minister's struggle for survival is made more difficult by a strong opposition coalition helmed by Anwar Ibrahim, Najib's equal on all counts. Experienced, articulate and ambitious, Anwar has through sheer force of personality been the linchpin of a sometimes fractious coalition that includes Islamists, ethno-nationalists, non-Muslim ethnic minorities, socialist democrats and economic liberals.

Charisma aside, Anwar also brings to the PR intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the ruling coalition, having himself once served as deputy leader. His familiarity with BN affords him the ability to capitalise on tensions that have emerged within the ruling coalition, by building bridges to disgruntled Front members and former allies who have found themselves unceremoniously omitted from the recent party lists.

Existential threat

Above all, the opposition head has unmatched political survival instincts. He was booted from power in the late 1990s for launching a failed challenge to the leadership of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and has since weathered numerous attempts to discredit him with charges of corruption and sexual misconduct by stressing how these were acts of desperation on the part of the government precisely because of the existential threat he posed.

Anwar is now a hair's breadth away from the ultimate leadership prize. It is no wonder that the former student radical has thrown everything and the kitchen sink for one final push to realise the dream, including defending the morality of a political strategy that involves encouraging defections. Conversely, defeat will mean that the curtain will finally fall on the long, controversial career of a mercurial Malaysian politician.

In the end, Messrs. Najib and Anwar are more similar than either might be prepared to concede. Both cut their teeth in the cauldron of youth politics and graduated with distinction. Both possess charisma in abundance and a commanding presence. Both claim the mantle of reformer, one from within government and the other a former deputy prime minister.

Finally, as Anwar's Sept. 16, 2008, claims of having enough defectors at the time to take over government and Najib's tolerance of BN's dubious takeover of the Perak state legislature in 2009 demonstrate, both are comfortable with the ambiguities of Malaysian politics. Both have been haunted by controversy - Anwar in the form of repeated allegations of sexual misconduct, and Najib by his aide's conviction for murder in the case of Mongolian model Altantuya Shaariibuu. Perhaps this is why their personal rivalry is so deep and so bitter. Only one can be fully redeemed.

Joseph Chinyong Liow is a professor of comparative and international politics and associate dean at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. This article first appeared in WSJ Online.