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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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No. 084/2013 dated 3 May 2013

## **13th Malaysian Elections: Evolving Landscape of Malaysian Politics**

By Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

### **Synopsis**

*Malaysia's 13th general elections have been described as the hardest fought in the history of the country. The close nature of the contest is likely to result in the re-shaping of Malaysian politics and have long term impact on the future direction of the country.*

### **Commentary**

The 13th Malaysian general elections on 5th May 2013 are likely to shape the future directions of the country. A recent survey conducted by the Universiti Malaya Centre for Democracy and Elections (Umcedel), put opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) leader, Anwar Ibrahim four points ahead of Barisan Nasional's (BN) Najib Razak on the question of the individual who is more qualified to be Prime Minister. The margin of error for the survey is 3%.

The survey is indicative of the close margin of victory that is expected by either BN or PR. This is likely to result in an intense, protracted horse-trading by both coalitions to secure a clear majority to form the government. The survey also indicated that large numbers of Chinese voters are more supportive of the PR. These dynamics will inevitably re-shape the Malaysian political system.

### **Defections of Parties and Individuals**

The Malaysian parliament comprised 222 seats and the winning coalition will need 112 seats to secure the government. A small margin of victory by either side will result in efforts by both sides of the political divide attempting to broker deals with parties and individuals from the opposing parties. A small PR victory or loss could trigger parties in the BN to switch sides. In particular the minority parties such as the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Gerakan could face pressure from the parties' grassroots to join PR. For instance, most recent surveys conducted have constantly shown that some of the Indian voters have turned back to BN, although these voters might not be enough to improve on the MIC's dismal performance in the 2008 elections. Even this scenario, it is almost certain that there will be pressure from within these parties to join PR or risk being made irrelevant within the new Malaysian political landscape.

Parties from Sabah and Sarawak could use the political impasse to negotiate more rights for themselves and the two states. After all, many East Malaysian leaders even those within BN have argued that BN has long deprived the states of their fair share of the economic resources. Likewise, the BN will also attempt to persuade

individuals from the PR to switch sides in the event of a small PR victory. BN is most likely to persuade the conservative wing of PAS to join the coalition by dangling the carrot of allowing for the implementation of stricter Islamic laws.

### **The Ethnic Composition of the Government and Opposition**

One of the key outcomes that is likely to emerge is the ethnic composition of the future government and opposition in Malaysia. Given the strong Chinese support for PR at this juncture, the Democratic Action Party may win a sizable number of parliamentary seats. Similarly, Chinese candidates from the People's Justice Party (PKR) might also win seats with strong Chinese presence. This will inevitably lead to the diminution of Chinese representative in government if the BN were to win as there might not be enough Chinese representatives to be appointed to government positions though some could be appointed from among senators.

A PR win could result in an overwhelmingly Malay opposition and a strong Chinese representation in government. Chinese representatives from the PR may need to be appointed to key portfolios formerly held by UMNO such as Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs and Finance. While this scenario would correct the inequitable sharing of political power, it will result in more racial polarization. The current campaign has seen UMNO attempting to scare Malay voters into voting for the BN with the threat of their loss of power and privileges to the Chinese if the PR were to attain power resulting in more Chinese presence in government.

### **State Governments Versus Federal Government**

Another likely outcome of the election is the dominance of one coalition at the federal level and the other at the state level. In the event of a BN victory at the federal level, the coalition still risks losing several states to the PR. These states include Perak, Perlis and Negeri Sembilan. Likewise, a PR victory at the federal level could still see some states such as Sabah Sarawak, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu and Kedah remaining with the BN. In Kedah for instance, there is a high possibility that Kedahans might vote for PR at the parliamentary level but BN the state level.

This new dynamic will force the government of the day to rethink its current strategies of depriving developments to the states under opposition rule. Any government that deprives more than half its population economic development risks being voted out in future elections. A strong opposition presence at the state level might also result in the re-negotiation of state power with the opposition demanding for more rights to be allocated to them.

### **The Contentious Position of Islam**

One of the key dynamics that is likely to emerge after the polls is the debates over the position of Islam in the country. While Islam is the state religion of Malaysia, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) has been adamant in its demand for the implementation of *hudud* laws at least in certain parts of Malaysia. Dr. Harun Din, the deputy spiritual leader of PAS has stated unequivocally that the *hudud* laws will be implemented if the PR were to take over government.

Many ulama in PAS are envisioning the formation of the *hudud* belt in northern Malaysia if PAS can wrest Perlis and Terengganu while maintaining control over Kedah and Kelantan. This vision is diametrically opposed to the DAP's vision of a secular state with a more moderate Islam being the dominant strand. Elements within UMNO are likely to capitalise on the issue by supporting PAS' *hudud* vision. This scenario does not bode well for Malaysia as its citizens will be divided along religious lines.

In summing up, the 13th Malaysian election is likely to produce a result that will change Malaysian politics drastically. There will be a re-configuration of political power amongst the different political alliances which will have long term consequences over the confluence of politics and ethnicity/religion as well as the Malaysian political system.

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