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Post GE13: New Era in Malaysian Politics?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The just-concluded general election in Malaysia has returned Prime Minister Najib Razak's Barisan Nasional to power, though with an erosion of support. It has also thrown up many questions about how it will define the shape of Malaysian politics to come.

Commentary

MALAYSIAN VOTERS woke up the morning after the 13th general election wondering whether they have entered a new era in the country's politics – and whether this new phase is something to be cheered, or worried about.

For those who wanted to see continuity and stability, they were pleased that the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN or National Front) is back in power, albeit with a reduced majority. Now they expect Prime Minister Najib Razak to fulfil his long list of promises in his agenda of political and economic transformation made during the hustings. For those who wanted change, they must have been disappointed that they were getting essentially more of the same. But is it?

Gains and misses

Najib's BN entered the general election on the defensive. He vowed to regain the two-thirds majority lost in 2008 when the much-vaunted political tsunami swept the country in favour of the opposition. The Anwar Ibrahim-led Pakatan Rakyat (PR) entered the polls as an opposition on the march to take over federal power in Putrajaya. As it turned out, that 2008 tsunami was stopped in its tracks, with BN winning 133 seats over PR's 89 and the mandate to form the government. Putrajaya was saved and Najib won back one of the four states lost in 2008 – Kedah. In the eyes of many BN supporters, he had rescued the BN ship from sinking. The immediate impact of the results is to put the country back on the road of political stability and economic certainty.

But BN's 133 seats is a step down from the 140 won in 2008, and short of the psychologically significant two-thirds majority of 148 seats crucial for constitutional amendments in a 222-strong parliament. Winning back Kedah may be good for BN's morale but Kedah is not Selangor which is rich, industrialised and politically and economically strategic to be left unrecovered, as Najib said during the hustings.

In fact, BN's support had actually eroded: many state assembly seats were lost to the opposition; BN retained Trengganu but only by a close margin; indeed in four states – Trengganu, Perak, Kedah and Negri Sembilan – BN did not win with a two-thirds majority. Further, four ministers, three deputy ministers and two chief ministers – Johor's Ghani Othman and Malacca's Ali Rustam - lost their fights. But the opposition also suffered an erosion of support, with several PAS and PKR leaders losing.

In other words, Najib may have won his first electoral mandate to lead, but on balance, BN's victory may not be as sweet as he had hoped for. Indeed, as former finance minister Daim Zainuddin has warned – Najib's political career may come under pressure in the eyes of UMNO members, although the prime minister had succeeded in defending BN's hold on power.

Chinese tsunami or urban tsunami?

Najib implicitly blamed the limited victory on what he called the “Chinese tsunami” – meaning ethnic Chinese voters deserting BN in droves for Anwar's PR. In other words, the nationwide tsunami of 2008 had become a tsunami by Chinese voters against the Chinese-based parties in BN, especially the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Gerakan in the peninsula. If in 2008 that tsunami drastically eroded Chinese support for MCA which they saw as ineffective in representing them, the rout was completed in this election. MCA leaders lost half of their seats won in 2008, raising the prospect of no Chinese representation in the next cabinet – something MCA leader Chua Soi Lek had promised will happen should the party do less well than in 2008.

The 2013 tsunami even swept aside Johor's chief minister Ghani Othman who had valiantly tried to stand in its way; Lim Kit Siang could not be stopped as the emergent opposition leader in Johor – the historical bastion of UMNO. Yet, the tsunami was not strong enough to capture the state, though it set the stage for the PR to make further inroads in this BN stronghold in the next general election.

But some Malaysian commentators, and later opposition leaders as well, argued that it is a mistake to view this opposition tide as a “Chinese tsunami”. The DAP which gained most could not have done it without the support of its Malay and Muslim allies in Anwar's PKR and the Islamist PAS. Lim Kit Siang could not have won his huge majority against Ghani Othman with just the support of the Chinese in Gelang Patah.

DAP leader Lim Guan Eng and Anwar said PR made gains in many Malay majority areas such as in Kelantan, Trengganu and Selangor. This means there must have been Malay support for DAP in a display of cross-ethnic support reminiscent of the 2008 tsunami. Indeed, PR as an opposition coalition is all about cross-ethnic political collaboration outside the BN framework. And the 2013 tsunami may well have been a tsunami of urban voters involving all races who wanted change.

Overall, while PR lost the election in terms of seats won, it actually pipped BN in popular vote. But given the first-past-the-post system, BN won the mandate to form the government because it secured more parliamentary seats than PR from the heavily weighted rural constituencies. Indeed BN's main component, UMNO did better than in 2008 by winning most of the seats it contested.

National reconciliation

In the wake of this mixed outcome, Najib called for what he called a process of national reconciliation to contain the trend towards polarisation. While it suggests an attempt to close what he saw as a growing ethnic divide, he has yet to clarify what he means by national reconciliation and who are the groups to be reconciled. If national reconciliation is to include political parties, will it involve, for instance, the MCA, Gerakan and DAP within the Chinese community on the one hand, and UMNO, PAS and PKR for the Malay community, on the other?

National reconciliation will inevitably also mean Malay unity talks involving UMNO, PAS and PKR. While it will be easier between UMNO and PAS, it will not be so with PKR. Will key UMNO leaders, including former premier Mahathir Mohamad, accept a reconciliation with Anwar Ibrahim?

In the meanwhile, Anwar has reconsidered his plan to retire, saying his work is not done yet, given the electoral outcome. He had stated he would quit should he not succeed in his Putrajaya mission in this election. Will Anwar's continued presence make it easier or more difficult for national reconciliation?

Najib's immediate priorities, apart from charting national reconciliation, will be to form his new cabinet and prepare the ground for the next big election – UMNO's own sometime later this year. Will there be rumblings against him in the run-up to the party election? Or will Najib be endorsed without question as the leader who will take UMNO, BN and the whole country towards Mahathir's vision of a developed state by 2020?

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