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**OUTLOOK FOR MALAYSIA'S
11th GENERAL ELECTION**

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ABSTRACT

When Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi dissolved the Malaysian Parliament on 4 March 2004, it was an indication that general elections will be held in Malaysia within the next 60 days. The forthcoming general elections will be the 11th in Malaysian history. Given that it will be his first general election at the helm of the Malaysian government, this election has been billed as a test of Prime Minister Abdullah's mandate by the local and international media. Beyond that however, the elections will also put to test UMNO's performance over the past 4 years. Since losing substantial Malay support to the Islamic opposition PAS, UMNO had embarked on a "rejuvenation" exercise that gained impetus on the back of economic recovery, peaked with the resignation of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and the ascension of Abdullah Badawi as Prime Minister of Malaysia. UMNO's revival has also been aided by external factors such as the fallout from the events of September 11. Indeed, recent developments do indicate that UMNO and the National Front will enter the 2004 general elections from a much stronger position than in 1999, and is likely not only to secure a two-thirds parliamentary majority, but also to repel the challenge from PAS and the opposition alliance nationwide.

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## OUTLOOK FOR MALAYSIA'S 11<sup>th</sup> GENERAL ELECTION

Held on 29 November 1999, Malaysia's 10<sup>th</sup> General Election resulted in victory for Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his National Front coalition. The win however, was overshadowed by several developments that would have been disturbing for Mahathir and UMNO, the dominant party in the National Front. First, the year 1999 marked the first instance in a Malaysian general election that UMNO failed to win a majority in parliament on its own accord. It won 71 out of 193 seats, meaning that it relied on the support from its coalition allies, notably the Chinese parties of the National Front, to secure electoral victory.

Second, it also marked the first time since 1959 that two Malay-dominated states, Terengganu and Kelantan, had fallen into opposition hands. Furthermore, while the National Front managed to retain control of Kedah by a narrow margin of parliamentary seats, PAS had managed to deny a critical two-thirds majority to UMNO in the state legislative assembly. Third, a number of senior UMNO party leaders, including ministers and deputy ministers were defeated. Finally, the overall vote for the National Front parties fell by 10 per cent—55 percent as compared with 65 percent in the 1995 elections, with UMNO's performance widely seen as the chief culprit<sup>1</sup>. More disturbing for UMNO and the National Front was the fact that in parliamentary seats where ethnic Malays formed more than two-thirds of the voters, UMNO only received 49 percent of the popular vote – a far cry from the 62 percent it scored in 1995.

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<sup>1</sup> This, despite the exclusion of some 680,000 new and mainly younger voters who had registered to vote over the previous year.

In sum, the growing Islamisation of Malaysia's Malay majority, disillusionment with money politics and perceived corruption within UMNO, as well as the perceived ill-treatment of ousted deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, had all worked to erode Malay support for UMNO in 1999. Not surprisingly, these developments motivated many to speculate that a “malaise” had set in for UMNO<sup>2</sup>. Harbingers of decline further raised doubts about UMNO’s ability to make the necessary changes in order to “rejuvenate” itself<sup>3</sup>. Instead, some proceeded to suggest that UMNO’s poor showing signalled a possible tightening of the Malaysian government’s authoritarian grip on Malaysian society<sup>4</sup>.

As the build-up to Malaysia’s 11<sup>th</sup> General Elections intensifies, it would be timely to take stock of key developments in Malaysian politics since 29 November 1999, as well as the platforms, strengths and weaknesses of the major parties. In that respect, this paper looks at the main contenders and assesses their prospects in light of major developments in Malaysian politics over the past four years, as well as the factors that may affect the outcome of the elections. The paper argues that UMNO and the National Front will enter the 2004 General Election in a much stronger position than in 1999. Consequently, the National Front can be expected to secure the important two-thirds parliamentary majority, and repel PAS’ and the Alternative Front’s bid to make further inroads into the ruling coalition’s support base.

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<sup>2</sup> Maznah Mohamad, “The UMNO Malaise”, *Aliran*, February 2002.

<sup>3</sup> M. Bakri Musa, *The Malay Dilemma Revisited: Race Dynamics in Modern Malaysia*, San Jose, C.A.: To Excel Inc, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See John Funston, “Malaysia: UMNO’s Search for Relevance”, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2001.

## **Key Election Issues**

### *September 11 and Islamic Militancy*

September 11 fundamentally transformed the Malaysian political landscape to UMNO and the National Front's favour<sup>5</sup>. September 11 and the fear of militancy amongst Islamic extremists could move the Malay ground, the so-called silent majority, back to UMNO and the National Front. The incumbent Malaysian government was quick to take advantage of the alarmist mood generated by Islamic militancy. They did this by associating PAS with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and with Islamic terrorist movements such as the KMM (Kumpulan Militan Malaysia) and JI (Jemaah Islamiyah), thus upping-the-ante in an already-intense Islamisation race<sup>6</sup>. To some extent, UMNO's action found justification in PAS' own reluctance to take a firm position against Islamic terrorists. For instance, at the 2002 PAS General Assembly, members unabashedly voiced their support for Palestinian suicide bombers, whom they eulogised as freedom fighters and martyrs.

As the results of the Indera Kayangan and Ketari by-elections (held on 19 January 2002 and 31 March 2002 respectively) demonstrated the strategy of demonising PAS in this fashion paid high dividends in cementing the support of the non-Malay electorate for the National Front. Indeed, the results of these by-elections in constituencies with a high concentration of non-Malays testified to the far-reaching political and electoral implications and the sea-change on the political landscape wrought by the events of

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<sup>5</sup> See Joseph Chinyong Liow, "The Mahathir Administration's War Against Islamic Militancy: Operational and Ideological Challenges", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, forthcoming, July 2004.

<sup>6</sup> During the government crackdown on the KMM for instance, the son of Kelantan Menteri besar Nik Aziz Nik Mat, Nik Adli Nik Aziz, was accused to have been the leader of the militant organisation, and to have links with the JI.

September 11. Given the substantial size of the non-Muslim electorate and the fact that UMNO remains locked in a battle with PAS for Muslim support, the events of September 11 and the consequent reservations for politicised Islam will no doubt ensure that non-Muslim votes fall firmly on the side of the ruling coalition at the forthcoming elections.

### *Retirement of Mahathir Mohamad*

While the resignation of Mahathir Mohammad after 22 years in power might have introduced an initial element of uncertainty in the ranks of UMNO and the National Front, Abdullah Badawi has managed to assuage doubters with his increasing assertiveness within the party and government. He has set in place a smooth transition of power. This in turn has generated what observers have termed the ‘feel good’ factor among the population, and it could well work to the advantage of the incumbent government.

Indeed, some have already suggested that the retirement of Mahathir could be a boost for UMNO’s prospects, simply because his continued leadership of UMNO was seen in certain quarters as an indication that the party was unwilling to implement the changes deemed necessary to regain the support of the Malay ground. Significantly, this view was shared by senior UMNO politicians as well. UMNO Supreme Council member, Shahrir Samad, for instance, opined after the Lunas by-election in November 2000 that “perhaps he's (Mahathir) been too long as the Prime Minister as to have lost touch with the people”<sup>7</sup>. Given the fact that a key dimension of PAS’ recent strategies against UMNO have been to personalise their attacks on the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, the departure of Mahathir from party and political leadership has thus

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<sup>7</sup> “Uneasy Currents”, *The Hindu*, 17 December 2000.

effectively removed one of the key dimensions to PAS' propaganda and neutralised a major opposition platform against UMNO, namely the call for change and renewal.

### *Gerrymandering*

Appointed by the *Yang Di-Pertuan Agung* on the recommendation of the government, the Election Commission has regularly been used to delineate or re-delineate electoral boundaries in Malaysia in order to maximise the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of the ruling coalition party<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, the most recent delineation exercise carried out in April 2003 saw 'reliable' states to the incumbent regime in 1999 padded with new constituencies quite out of proportion to their increases in the voter population. For example, Johor, a traditional UMNO stronghold, gained six new seats, while Sabah, where the opposition has a negligible presence, five. "Relatively secure" states like Selangor and Pahang also had their seat allocations increased by five and three respectively. Kedah, Perlis, and Terengganu, states where PAS enjoys strong support, received none, despite voter increases in the first two states that were greater than many others that had their seats increased<sup>9</sup>. Notwithstanding the protests of the opposition and civil society groups, the redelineation exercise, which many argue has been even more lopsided than the last one conducted eight years ago, has clearly diluted the scope of the opposition's challenge. On the other hand, it also demonstrates that the ruling coalition remains unsure of its popularity in the North.

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Crisis, Choice and Change: Malaysian Electoral Politics at the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century", *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol.7, No.2, December 1999, p.53.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that while the proposal of the Election Commission was passed with a 149 to 34 majority in parliament, a counter-proposal by a PAS parliamentarian for two additional seats in Kedah, Terengganu, and Kelantan, and one each for Perlis, Malacca and Federal Territories was defeated by the same score.



### *The Economy*

Malaysia's economic performance is widely expected to be a major factor at the forthcoming election, and one that will work in the National Front's favour. While the Malaysian economy was hit by the regional SARS crisis in early 2003, its cornerstone export and tourism industries have since rebounded; and despite original official forecasts of economic growth for 2004 to be between 5.5-6 percent, analysts have since suggested that actual growth could well be higher<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the recovery of the American, European, and Japanese economies indicate that Malaysia's exports could well expand further in 2004. Together with a reduction in unemployment rates and improved business sentiment, these factors signal a strengthening Malaysian economy, which contributes to the so-called "feel good" factor in the build-up to the 2004 elections.

Perhaps of greater significance to the forthcoming elections has been the shape of the economic policy under the new administration in Malaysia. The new Prime Minister has distanced himself from the excesses of former administration that favoured high-profile infrastructure projects. Given that government investments had become increasingly associated with selected *Bumiputra* businessmen, the government's move to defer several major projects has sent a signal that under the new administration more transparency in the awarding of government contracts may well be expected<sup>11</sup>. While many, including the opposition, have questioned the sustainability of Abdullah's war on corruption, few would deny that it has thus far had an important symbolic effect on the

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<sup>10</sup> "Rosy economy a boost for Barisan", *Straits Times*, 3 March 2004.

<sup>11</sup> The clearest example is the case of Syed Moktar Al-Bukhary, whose Malaysian Mining Corporation was granted the contracts for the southern port of Tanjung Pelepas and the Senai air cargo hub, as well as the more controversial Bakun Hydro electric dam and U.S.\$3.8 billion double tracking rail project.

minds of the Malaysian electorate. Consequently, it appears that a major campaign platform for the National Front would be one emphasising economic growth, development and more importantly, a more equitable distribution of national wealth given the government's intention to focus on the rural and agricultural sector.

### *The Anwar Factor*

In 1999, the dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim from the party and government and his subsequent high-profile trial were seen as a key factor that worked to UMNO's disadvantage. These events rallied the opposition into a multi-party alliance – the Alternative Front. Anwar's ouster and humiliation - and especially the black eye inflicted on him - sparked a groundswell of anger and discontent. A widespread clamour for political reforms and change unleashed the *reformasi* movement, and culminated in the formation of a new political party, Keadilan along with a successful 1999 General Election for the Malay-based opposition parties. Testifying to the magnitude of the Anwar factor, PAS leaders themselves have attributed their victory in Terengganu to the former Deputy Prime Minister's public humiliation at the hands of the government<sup>12</sup>.

While Anwar is far from being a spent political force and assuredly continues to enjoy widespread support, especially among the Malay grassroots, his absence from the political landscape over the past few years as a result of his internment has proven costly to Keadilan, which would no doubt have profited from his active leadership. Moreover, with the resignation of Mahathir and the advent of a new administration under Abdullah Badawi, some Malays no longer consider the *Reformasi* spirit of the late 1990s a matter

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<sup>12</sup> This view was expressed by Abdul Hadi Awang to Chandra Muzaffar, and shared by the latter in a seminar held at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies on 21 October 2003.

of great pertinence to contemporary Malaysian politics. It was not surprising thence, that some Malays have gravitated back to the ruling coalition from the *Reformasi* movement.

### **UMNO (United Malay National Organisation)**

Since its performance at the 1999 general election, predictions were made that UMNO's signature on Malay politics was gradually eroding. On hindsight, these certainly seem premature. With the aid of external events and a smooth leadership transition, it appears that UMNO, the dominant Malay party in the National Front, is well placed not only to defend its position at the forthcoming general elections, but also to possibly turn back the PAS tide in Northern Peninsular Malaysia.

While the previous discussion on the significance of by-election results does indicate that support for PAS remains strong among the Malay-Muslim community, there is reason to believe that UMNO will also enter the 2004 contest in a much stronger standing than it did in 1999. In particular, the party has over the past few years displayed an ability to adjust to new political realities and challenges, as well as capitalise on developments in the domestic and international political sphere for its own political ends.

A key initiative taken by the UMNO leadership was to revive its diminishing popularity among the younger generation. This has resulted in several initiatives targeted at winning the support of this electorate. The establishment of Puteri UMNO, then fronted by dynamic lawyer, Azalina Othman, in August 2001 was a significant strategic move in this respect<sup>13</sup>. The formation of Puteri UMNO not only demonstrated the party's recognition that young female votes play a critical role in Malaysian politics, the organisation also enjoyed the direct patronage of the Prime Minister. The UMNO

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<sup>13</sup> See "Puteri UMNO: Sound and Fury Signifying Nothing New", *Aliran*, No.8, 2002.

propaganda campaign among the younger Malay generation was given a further push with the implementation of the “*Pemuda Masuk Kampung*” campaign, which saw leaders and members of Pemuda UMNO, the youth wing of UMNO, integrate more closely with the people through a range of grassroots social and economic programmes<sup>14</sup>. UMNO has also attempted to counter the Islamic credentials of PAS with its “*Pidato Perdana*” publicity counter-offensive. The brainchild of UMNO information chief and the liaison committee chief of Kelantan UMNO, Mustapha Mohamed, this programme is built around UMNO Ceramah roadshows by teams of national and local leaders, as well as Ulama.

The elevation of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to the position of Prime Minister and acting President of UMNO after the retirement of Mahathir Mohamad in October 2003 injected greater impetus to the transformation of UMNO. In particular, Abdullah has won plaudits for his seizing of the Islamic initiative from PAS, his public crackdown on corruption within the party and government and the re-orientation of government policy to focus on the poor.

In his characteristically inconspicuous but firm manner, Abdullah countered the challenge of PAS by dismissing the Islamic party’s blueprint for the establishment of an Islamic state as an election gimmick. He argued that the current Malaysian government was already observing Islamic features of governance. Prior to that, Abdullah had already displayed his Islamic credentials in convincing fashion when he symbolically conducted prayers at the May 2002 funeral of Fadzil Noor, the late-president of PAS. As Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah continues to regularly conduct opening prayers at a

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<sup>14</sup> See “UMNO Youth starting to listen to its young critics”, *Straits Times*, 25 January 2000.

range of activities, from government meetings to the breaking of fast during the *Ramadhan* period.

While a crackdown on corruption had already begun immediately following the previous general elections, when Mahathir was still at the helm of the party, the onslaught has intensified significantly under Abdullah's leadership<sup>15</sup>. The Anti-Corruption Agency, earlier regarded as an ineffective bureaucratic body, has in recent times arrested and charged several high-ranking political, corporate and governmental figures for various illegal activities. Abdullah has also shown himself to be responsive to public disquiet and dissatisfaction with the public services and law enforcement agencies. The setting up of a Royal Commission to enquire into the conduct and performance of the Malaysian Police has won him support, as has his impromptu inspection visits to government departments, such as Immigration, to encourage greater professionalism in the civil service. In general, Abdullah's high-profile crackdown has undermined the opposition's campaign against corruption in government, political and corporate sectors.

Abdullah has made the battle against poverty a priority for his administration. He has been seen giving personal attention to the plight of the poor in flood-stricken areas. The newly introduced policy of offering tuition for children of poor families has helped government policy return to the spirit of the NEP by tackling poverty at the source. This shift in policy towards small-scale development and social issues was given further credence by Prime Minister Abdullah's decision to halt or put off multi-million ringgit infrastructure projects that threatened to further burden Malaysia's recovering economy.

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<sup>15</sup> See for example, "UMNO strips some members of senior posts amid by-election", *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 13 March 2002.

Under the stewardship of Abdullah Badawi then, the UMNO that will be contesting in 2004 will be different from the one that contested the 1999 General Election. Nevertheless, there remain some areas of concern for Abdullah. A primary concern is the extent to which UMNO can regain ground lost to PAS in the Northern Malay-dominant states. Prospects for UMNO success in Kelantan will depend on the state of Kelantan UMNO, which has experienced some internal strife over the choice of division chiefs, and dependent on the party's ability to make a dent in the popularity of Kelantan Chief Minister Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who is also the spiritual leader of PAS. Nik Aziz is an almost insurmountable presence in Kelantan politics. Within Kelantan UMNO, tensions have arisen as a consequence of recent moves by current UMNO chief, Mustapha Mohammad, to re-shuffle senior leadership in the state. This resulted in the replacement of four popular division heads, a move that has been unpopular with certain circles within Kelantan UMNO.

As for Terengganu, analysts and punters are more optimistic given the fact that Abdullah Badawi has himself taken over as state UMNO chief and has set his sights on regaining the state. The prognosis for UMNO's defeat in Terengganu in 1999 identified two factors. First, Terengganu politics at the time was dominated by then-Menteri Besar Wan Mokhtar Wan Ahmad, who had made little effort grooming leaders and successors. This had led to widespread discontent within the party mechanism in UMNO and subsequently had an adverse effect on the party's prospects. Indeed, intra-party politics was at the time seen to have been the largest chink in Terengganu UMNO's armour. Furthermore, the "Anwar" issue was also recognised as a major contributing factor to the unpopularity of UMNO in Terengganu in 1999. UMNO's chances in Terengganu will be

boosted with the replacement of Wan Mokhtar and the “Anwar-fatigue” that has crept into the political consciousness of Malaysians over the past five years. Even so, returning to power in Terengganu will not be an easy task as PAS is expected to leverage on its good record over the past four years, reflected in a fall in crime rates and the eradication of public vice-activities. In tandem with these uncertainties, a tactical challenge for UMNO hence, is to either focus resources and attention on Kedah and Perlis, where it remains vulnerable, and where PAS has indicated it will concentrate its assault, or on Terengganu and Kelantan, where significant UMNO success in turning the PAS tide could well reverberate throughout the entire country, but where prospects of such success remain questionable.

### **PAS (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*)**

PAS made strong inroads into Malaysia's majority Muslim community in the last elections in 1999, tripling its parliamentary representation to 27. It controls two northeastern Malay majority states -- Kelantan and oil rich Terengganu -- and has set its sights on Perlis, Kedah, Pahang and Selangor<sup>16</sup>.

Following the death of former president Fadzil Noor, then widely seen as a moderate in May 2002; the elevation of the more radical Abdul Hadi Awang to the presidency; and the election of ulama Hassan Shukri to the post of deputy president, senior positions in the Islamic opposition party are now occupied by a perceivable “hardline” leadership<sup>17</sup>. Despite this, the PAS leadership is aware that its ambitions of national leadership cannot be premised solely on its popularity in Northern Malaysia

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<sup>16</sup> “Malaysia’s new Islamic chief eyes six more states in general election”, *Agence France Press*, 21 July 2002.

<sup>17</sup> “Battle for Islam”, *Asiaweek*, 16 June 2000.

alone. The challenge for PAS then, is to expand its appeal to the moderate Muslim community as well as the non-Muslims of Malaysia. The party has endeavoured to do this via a political platform premised on its opposition to social injustices and inequality in the spirit of the tradition of Islamic political movements throughout the Muslim world.

In order to present a more palatable front to non-Muslims and moderate Muslims, Party President Abdul Hadi Awang, while insisting that PAS would continue with its aim to establish an Islamic state governed by *Hudud*, also reiterated that should the opposition coalition win the parliamentary election and control the federal government, it would implement an Alternative Front manifesto in non-PAS controlled states, while PAS-controlled states would be governed by a separate manifesto of PAS. Beyond that, the Islamic party has also attempted to endear itself to non-Muslims; among other gestures, it lifted a 10-year old ban on pig slaughtering imposed by the previous UMNO-led administration in Terengganu and promised to favourably consider applications to build non-Muslim houses of worship in PAS-controlled states<sup>18</sup>.

Party President Hadi Awang has also reiterated regularly that the party was committed to end all draconian laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA), that allows detention without trial, and the Official Secrets Act that stifles opposition dissent<sup>19</sup>. PAS' prospects for success however, will certainly depend to great extents on its ability to convince moderate Muslims as well as non-Muslims of its Islamist vision and political agenda for Malaysia post-September 11.

Despite attempts to reach out to non-Muslims however, the key objective for the Islamic Party for the forthcoming elections will almost certainly be to further entrench its

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Liow, "Don't Write PAS Off Just Yet", *Straits Times*, 24 December 2001.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, "16 tahanan ISA ancam mogok lapar sampai mati", *Harakah*, 26 February 2003.



position in its core electoral base of the Malay-Muslim community by emphasising its Islamic credentials. The PAS blueprint for the Islamic state, released on 12 November 2003 and presented as the highpoint of the party's struggle since its formation in 1951, was targeted at achieving this effect<sup>20</sup>. The document attempted to reconcile the need for *Syariah* in Malaysia with an emphasis provisions for greater democracy in Malaysia under an Islamic state, while attempting to allay non-Muslim fears that an Islamic state in Malaysia would be a theocracy and assuring them of religious and cultural freedoms and an option to live under Islamic criminal laws or the current system. Beneath the rhetoric however, was a realisation that the document was urgently required to counter the Islamic credentials which Abdullah Badawi, then heir-apparent to Mahathir, would be bringing to the top leadership of UMNO.

The urgency behind the launch of the blueprint in fact had the paradoxical effect of drawing attention to the PAS leadership's inability to fend off opposition to the document, including those from partners in the opposition alliance. This in turn amplified the tension existing within the party between so-called moderates and hardliners, who were clearly behind the sanction of the document, which some had already suspected was percolating beneath the surface. It has been revealed, for example, that friction arose between the Dewan Ulama and Majlis Syura on the one hand, and the (CWC) Central Working Committee on the other, over the shape that the document was to take. Central to these disagreements was the grievance of the CWC that it was not consulted on the form of the document, which in its original form was seen by members

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<sup>20</sup> See Harun Din, "*Negara Islam: Antara Penolakan dan Penerimaan*", [www.parti-pas.org](http://www.parti-pas.org), undated.

of the CWC as a potential catalyst for further alienation and ill-feeling of non-Muslim and fence sitters among the Muslim population<sup>21</sup>.

Certainly, while PAS was successful in bringing in professionals into the party ranks in the late 1990s, what has emerged from developments such as the politicking surrounding the Islamic state document as well as the 2003 PAS Muktamar is the fact that tension may well be brewing within the party<sup>22</sup>. Further to that, the perceived unilateral release of the Islamic state blueprint also fuelled the concerns of PAS' allies in the Alternative Front that the Islamist party was prepared to prioritise its own narrow interests above those of the opposition coalition. The issue of PAS unilateralism arose again in recent times, with Keadilan protesting the release of Alternative Front parliamentary and state seat allocations for Kedah without their knowledge or consent.

Indeed, the release of the blueprint for the Islamic State appears to have created more problems than solutions for the Islamic opposition. PAS had for a long time held the upper hand in its debates with UMNO over the Islamisation process in Malaysia with its ability to repeatedly criticise UMNO initiatives as “unIslamic”<sup>23</sup>. Put differently, it was precisely the absence of a “blueprint” that gave PAS the leverage over UMNO, allowing it to hold the moral high-ground<sup>24</sup>. Now, discussions of the Islamisation of Malaysia at PAS Ceramah will have to deal with the terms of the blueprint in relation to the federal constitution as well as the rights and limitations of non-Muslims, among other matters.

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<sup>21</sup> See “Islamic state proposal – damage control sets in”, [www.Malaysiakini.com](http://www.Malaysiakini.com), 19 November 2003.

<sup>22</sup> See Joseph Liow, “The 49<sup>th</sup> PAS Congress: Politics behind the rhetoric”, *IDSS Commentaries*, September 2003.

<sup>23</sup> “PAS minta biar UMNO dan PAS selesaikan soal Islam”, *Harakah*, 5 December 2002

<sup>24</sup> See Joseph Chinyong Liow, “Political Islam in Malaysia: Problematising Discourse and Practice in the UMNO-PAS ‘Islamisation Race’”, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, (forthcoming, July 2004).

Another important test for PAS will be its ability to harness the support of a new generation of voters<sup>25</sup>. On this matter, Maznah Mohamed made the following pertinent observation:

While Islam can still be used to retain loyalty towards a cause it cannot be used to guarantee jobs for the thousands of unemployed bumiputera university graduates. And there are many pragmatic issues that will concern the youths of today, pushing idealism to the backburner of politics that is simply too arcane for the likes of this generation<sup>26</sup>.

Furthermore, the inability of PAS to penetrate into Sabah and Sarawak despite its repeated attempts will mean that they might have to surrender the seats in the two East Malaysian states to the National Front. This, combined with difficulties extending its reach into traditional UMNO and National Front strongholds of Johor, Pahang and Malacca further accentuates popular opinion that PAS is a Northern Peninsular party that cannot claim national appeal.

The strength of the PAS base is centered around Kelantan and Terengganu. While Kelantan has been the traditional stronghold of PAS, it has been Terengganu-based members that have formed the bulk of the party's numerical strength and leadership. Dewan Ulama chief Harun Taib and Muslimat(Women) head Fatimah Zainab Ibrahim, are from Terengganu (indeed they are husband and wife); as are Vice-president Mustapha Ali and president Abdul Hadi Awang. While PAS is well placed to consolidate its position in Kelantan and Terengganu, it is difficult to see the party extending its reach further into UMNO territory. Perhaps history is the best indicator in the final analysis of PAS's prospects. It has been argued elsewhere that the success of PAS has more often than not been correlated to internal problems within UMNO or the broader National

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<sup>25</sup> See "Islamization on Campus", *Asiaweek*, 16 June 2000.

<sup>26</sup> "Winning Hearts and Minds: Malay Parties and their Prospects", *Aliran*, No.7, 2003.

Front. If this was indeed true, the extent to which the government parties have consolidated, and in some respects even strengthened their position may indicate that the chances of the Islamic opposition expanding its power base by any significant measure may well be more remote than they would like to believe<sup>27</sup>.

### **MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and Gerakan (*Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*)**

Despite the fact that much attention has been focused on the UMNO-PAS “Islamisation race”, the key electorate at the forthcoming election could well be the substantial Chinese minority. Established in 1949, the Chinese-based MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) has about 1.02 million members and is the second-largest National Front component party. Given its size and history, the MCA has traditionally represented this economically-powerful faction in the National Front, and will be expected to deliver the support required to bring a resounding victory at the 11<sup>th</sup> General Election the way it did in 1999, when it won 96 of 112 seats contested, including 28 parliamentary seats. However, MCA has traditionally been plagued with internal politics and infighting that often boil over into open, acrimonious political contests. A similar mood of party disunity built up soon after the 1999 general election and threatened to split the party<sup>28</sup>.

After delivering resounding support for the National Front at the 1999 General Election, the Chinese community, and MCA in particular, had expected a bigger political role in coalition politics in the form of extra ministerial posts<sup>29</sup>. When this did not

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<sup>27</sup> See Joseph Chinyong Liow, “Exigency or Expediency? Contextualising Political Islam and the PAS Challenge in Malaysian Politics”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.25, No.2, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> See Joseph Liow, “Crisis of Chinese Politics in Malaysia’s Ruling Coalition”, *IDSS Commentaries*, March 2003.

<sup>29</sup> It currently has 4 ministerial and 7 deputy ministerial positions.

materialise, a split within the MCA began to emerge as disgruntled party leaders blamed the then-President Ling Liong Sik for the failure to negotiate a greater representation for the party. Contending factions took shape when Ling later retracted a verbal agreement to support party Vice-president Chan Kong Choy's promotion to Deputy President in favour of his own candidate.

Internal politicking was further intensified with the purchase of Nanyang Press Holdings Bhd, which publishes two influential Chinese language dailies, by the party's investment arm, Huaren Holdings Sdn. Bhd. Ling rationalised the purchase as "a willing-buyer; willing-seller situation". The decision was however challenged by then MCA Deputy-resident, Lim Ah Lek, who had abstained during the vote to purchase Nanyang Press at an emergency MCA presidential council meeting, and who feared that the papers would be used as a "mouthpiece" for Ling. Despite the Ling faction's victory, the feud between the party's top two leaders had by then become public. Later the Lim faction boycotted a MCA Presidential Council meeting called at the behest of UMNO to discuss disciplinary action against two Penang state assemblymen who had gone against the National Front whip and abstained in a vote against an opposition proposal.

Deputy President Lim, supported by a "Gang of Eight" including Vice-presidents Chan Kong Choy and Chua Jui Meng, MCA Youth leader Ong Tee Keat, and Wanita MCA deputy Tan Tee Yew, indicated that he was prepared to challenge Ling for the party presidency<sup>30</sup>. This contest was widely expected at the 2005 party elections. However, calm was restored when both Ling Liong Sik and Lim Ah Lek agreed to resign from their positions (following the intervention of Prime Minister Mahathir). The party rank-and-file also consequently accepted a negotiated arrangement that saw Ling's

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<sup>30</sup> "Deputy to challenge MCA chief for party's presidency", *Straits Times*, 7 January 2003.

protege Ong Ka Ting assume the post of party president, while Lim ally Chan Kong Choy was installed as vice-president. Whether this will be a long-term solution acceptable to the party however, will no doubt depend on the MCA's performance in the general elections, where a poor showing could revive factionalism and motivate a contest for party presidency.

In a move that further indicated party consolidation in preparation for general elections, party president Ong Ka Ting floated the possibility of a merger between MCA and Gerakan in December 2003. Gerakan president Lim Keng Yaik responded positively, and both parties have since set up "special committees" that are currently investigating the viability of such a merger. While many observers have suggested that this initiative may prove to be little more than an election device to rally Chinese support, the potential implications of a merger will certainly be significant, not just for Chinese politics in Malaysia, but also for Malaysian politics in general. In theory, such a merger, if implemented with full support from the rank-and-file of respective parties, would clearly strengthen the hand of the Chinese community in the National Front<sup>31</sup>.

The 36-year-old Gerakan, which holds 6 parliamentary seats along with a cabinet post and the position of Chief Minister of Penang, has approximately 250,000 members and was principally founded as a multi-racial party. Over the years however, the Chinese membership in the party has mushroomed at the expense of other ethnic groups, and today Gerakan is widely seen as the second Chinese party in the National Front. Gerakan's strong base in the Chinese community has also seen it engaged in regular struggles with the MCA over leadership of the community in the National Front. The

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<sup>31</sup> This would of course draw attention to UMNO, whether it would be in its interest for a unified Chinese representation to materialise, and whether it would then move to block such a merger.

most recent confrontation was a standoff over the leadership of Penang state, which has traditionally been a Gerakan prerogative, but where the MCA enjoys a larger representation. Due to such enduring tension between MCA and Gerakan, recent proposals for a merger were thus dismissed by critics as little more than an election device.

Despite the internal problems in MCA and the turbulent relationship it has with Gerakan, it is widely expected that the key Chinese component parties of the National Front will deliver Chinese support to the ruling coalition. This is because in the minds of the vast majority of the Chinese electorate in 2004 the decisive factor is their concern for the Islamisation of Malaysia. Aggravated by September 11 and statements often made by PAS leaders and the rank-and-file regarding the need to implement the *Hudud* criminal code in Malaysia, it is likely that rivalries and tensions within the Chinese community would be restrained in the wake of the common concern for the political ambitions of the Islamic party PAS.

### **Keadilan (*Parti Keadilan Rakyat*)**

Formed in the wake of the *Reformasi* movement that engulfed Malaysia after the Anwar Ibrahim saga, Keadilan was seen as a middle-class party that sought to represent the sentiments of a new generation of Malaysians who desired to break out of the traditional mould of ethnic politics that was characteristic in Malaysia. The party was built around ABIM members and members of UMNO who left the party when Anwar Ibrahim was sacked, and managed to win five of the 60 seats it contested. Even then, it should be noted that three of their five seats in parliament came from Kelantan, where the

party in fact leveraged on PAS support and election machinery. This raised questions very early on as to whether Keadilan could sustain itself in the rough world of Malaysian politics.

Despite attempts at shoring up the status of the party through a merger with the more-experienced PRM (*Parti Rakyat Malaysia*), Keadilan is still widely seen as lacking a viable political platform. While the single-minded obsession of the party leadership for the Anwar cause won it much sympathy and support in 1999, this same obsession is likely to be a significant obstacle the party's attempt to improve on its previous showing at the forthcoming elections. Since 1999, Keadilan has not been able to present a convincing party platform beyond their agitation for democratisation and the release of Anwar. In fact, recent statements by the party's leadership that they intended to revive the Anwar issue as an election platform for 2004 gives further credence to this belief that the party revolves around the cause of one man.

Given the fact that the Anwar factor is not expected to have the same impact on Malaysian mindsets as it did in 1999, it is unlikely that Keadilan's platform or brand of opposition politics will do any significant damage to the support base of the National Front. Paradoxically too, it has been the continued focus on Anwar that has given rise to cracks within the party. Senior leaders who attempted to take Keadilan beyond Anwar were sidelined soon after the 1999 General Election. Later, internal problems associated with the marginalisation of pro-ABIM leaders within the party had a negative effect on its support base, creating further factionalism and defections<sup>32</sup>. Aside from the resignation and defection of senior party leaders, the Keadilan election machinery has also been

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<sup>32</sup> See "More Keadilan state leaders to quit posts", [www.Malaysiakini.com](http://www.Malaysiakini.com), 25 January 2002.



crippled by the continued incarceration of some of their second-echelon leaders under the Internal Security Act.

### **DAP (Democratic Action Party)**

The 1999 general election saw the DAP's presence and stature as a key Malaysian opposition party eclipsed by PAS and Keadilan. Indeed, the party's dismal showing at the elections was its worst in its history. In 1999, it won only 10 of 44 parliamentary seats contested and witnessed the defeat of party stalwarts Lim Kit Siang, Karpal Singh, and Chen Man Hin.<sup>33</sup> Party leaders and political analysts have largely blamed DAP's showing on its ill-fated liaison with PAS in the Alternative Front opposition coalition. Yet the strategic miscalculation of aligning itself with PAS only served to aggravate deep-seated problems within the party as a consequence of leadership stagnation, an inability to find a political platform beyond the old ethnic politics model of the 1960s, and most importantly, disquiet within party ranks<sup>34</sup>.

On 22 September 2001, the DAP officially withdrew from the Alternative Front, citing incompatibility of its political agenda with that of PAS. Since then, the party has also alienated itself from other opposition elements, and has accused Keadilan of sabotaging its interests<sup>35</sup>. Given these developments, it is likely that the DAP will be little more than a peripheral player at the forthcoming elections.

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<sup>33</sup> Its 10 parliamentary and 11 state seats won in 1999 paled in comparison to the 20 parliamentary and 45 state seats won in 1990.

<sup>34</sup> For example, a group of DAP politicians from Terengganu resigned *en-masse* from the party after receiving instructions to relinquish their positions in the wake of the DAP-PAS fallout. Tensions also exist between supporters of Lim Guan Eng, son of former secretary-general Lim Kit Siang, and his opponents who have accused the elder Lim of favouritism.

<sup>35</sup> "Kit Siang: DAP will not support coalition's by-election campaign", *New Straits Times*, 6 January 2002.

## **MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress)**

The present political milieu in Malaysia is the first since Malaysian independence where the political opposition does not have Indian representation in the parliament, state assemblies, or local councils. This fact illustrates not only the weakness of the multi-ethnic opposition alliance, but also the dearth of savvy political leadership among the Indian community, which accounts for 10.7 percent of the total population in Malaysia. Indeed, the under-representation of the Malaysian Indian community has often been seen as a source of aggravation of the social-economic problems they are confronted with. These include stifling education quotas, neglect of Tamil-language schools, increased crime, housing limits, and the low levels of Indian employment in the civil service. Furthermore, the economic position of the Indian community continues to lag substantially behind both the Malays and Chinese<sup>36</sup>.

The absence of either a major Indian-based opposition party, or strong Indian leaders to challenge the incumbent representatives from the National Front will mean that the MIC, which holds a ministerial position and 7 parliamentary seats, will enter the 2004 elections from a position of strength. Moreover, it seems that the opposition alliance, in what appears to have been a calibrated tactical move, is likely to surrender Indian representation to the National Front once again, given that the matter of Indian representation has not been raised at discussions on seat allocations between PAS and Keadilan<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> It is known that the community's share of the Malaysian economy has stagnated at one percent throughout the duration of the NEP, while the Malay stake has risen from 1.9 percent to 20.3 percent, and the Chinese from 22.5 percent to 44.5 percent, since the inception of the NEP in 1970.

<sup>37</sup> "Give Indian candidates safe seats, opposition told", [www.Malaysiakini.com](http://www.Malaysiakini.com), 26 February 2004.

## **PBS (*Parti Bersatu Sabah*) and East Malaysia**

Unlike Sarawak, where electoral support is firmly behind the ruling coalition's Sarawak-based component parties such as SUPP (Sarawak United People's Party) and PBDS (*Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak*), the politics in the Eastern Malaysian state of Sabah has traditionally been intense. The return of the PBS, once Sabah's most established opposition party and famous for its eleventh-hour "change of heart" at the 1990 general election that delivered the state into hands of the National Front at the end of 2002 suggests that this tradition is likely to be broken in 2004 unless something spectacular takes place again at the last minute. The re-delineation of seat boundaries giving Sabah five more parliamentary seats further demonstrates the ruling government's conviction that Sabah will stay in line at the next election.

The importance of the National Front's ability to secure and the opposition's inability to penetrate East Malaysia cannot be overstated. Representation allocated to East Malaysia accounts for almost a quarter of the seats in the federal parliament. Consequently, the likelihood that National Front will win the bulk of these seats will certainly proffer them a major advantage over the opposition.

## **Conclusion**

This study has surveyed the political landscape in Malaysia in terms of the key issues and parties contesting at the forthcoming 2004 General Election. The paper suggests that while many of the "traditional" strategies, such as gerrymandering via the Electoral Commission and money politics will continue to play an important role in the elections, several developments in both the international and domestic political spheres

since November 1999 imply that UMNO may well have “rejuvenated” to an extent sufficient to see it lead a strengthened National Front coalition in warding off the pretensions of PAS and the Alternative Front to national leadership at the forthcoming general elections.

The National Front’s two-third majority is not under any significant threat and the opposition’s inability to make inroads into East Malaysia will surely play a critical role in securing this psychological advantage. Non-Malay support will fall firmly on the side of the National Front, though this would be more the result of the post-September 11 mindset of the non-Muslim population and the inability of the opposition to cobble together robust non-Muslim representation than any inherent popularity of the non-Malay parties in the ruling coalition. The biggest question however, is the direction of Malay support. Here, the paper has shown that while PAS continues to be strong in Terengganu and Kelantan, a combination of factors, in particular September 11; the resignation of Mahathir; the strength of the election machinery of the National Front and its monopoly of the state apparatus; the state of the economy; a generally diminishing public interest in the Anwar factor; and the hitherto impressive performance of the Abdullah Badawi administration; all indicate that UMNO is primed to fend off the challenge from PAS throughout the rest of Malaysia.

In the final analysis then, the National Front will win the important two-thirds majority, and is likely to do so with an improved overall performance compared to 1999. The swing of the political pendulum to the opposition’s advantage in 1999 may well have been a highpoint of opposition politics in Malaysia when ideological differences were set aside for the perceived common objective. Politics since November 1999 however, has

shown that ideological differences would have to be either reconciled or compromised if alliances are to endure. Once the dust has settled after the 2004 contest, the 1999 pendulum swing could well prove to have been merely temporary.

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