

# MALAYSIA'S ELECTORAL UPHEAVAL

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Malaysia held its twelfth general election on 8 March 2008, with results that surprised everyone. For the first time since independence in 1957, the ruling National Front (BN) coalition lost the two-thirds parliamentary majority that had enabled coalition leaders to change the constitution at will. The opposition coalition, led by former BN figure Anwar Ibrahim, not only deprived the BN and its core, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), of their accustomed legislative dominance, but also managed to win control over five of the thirteen state governments. Long thought to belong firmly to the realm of one-party dominance and semidemocracy, Malaysian politics had taken a sudden and remarkable turn toward greater competitiveness despite all the steps that the BN had taken to bias elections in its own favor.

From any angle, the results were an unprecedented setback for the BN. In the wake of the voting, UMNO and its junior partners (the most important of which are meant to represent Malaysia's Indian- and Chinese-heritage minorities) found themselves facing a transformed political landscape. Customarily, the real elections in Malaysia have been the intra-UMNO party races, and the real legislature has been the UMNO caucus in Parliament, with UMNO's leader and second-in-command automatically filling the offices of prime minister and deputy prime minister, respectively. State governments that are under opposition control (or which simply show an independent streak) have found themselves undermined by the center's bribery, or simply toppled outright via the center's imposition of emergency rule.

**TABLE—THE DRASTIC CHANGE OF THE ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE IN THE 2008 MALAYSIAN ELECTIONS**

PARTY	SHARE OF VALID VOTES (%)			NO. OF PARLIAMENTARY SEATS		
	2004	2008	Change	2004	2008	Change
<b>Barisan Nasional (BN)</b>	63.84	51.39	-12.45	199	140	-59
UMNO	35.63	29.98	-5.65	110	79	-31
UMNO's West Malaysian Allies	22.63	15.37	-7.26	51	20	-31
UMNO's East Malaysian Allies	5.58	6.03	0.45	38	41	3
<b>Pakatan Rakyat</b>	34.06*	47.43†	13.37	19	82	63
PKR	8.43	19.00	10.57	1	31	30
DAP	9.94	14.07	4.13	12	28	16
PAS	15.69	14.36	-1.33	6	23	17
<b>Minor Parties &amp; Independents</b>	2.10	1.18	-0.92	1	0	-1
Total	100.00	100.00	0.00	219	222	3

*Notes:*

\* The Pakatan Rakyat did not exist in 2004. This figure represents the total vote gained that year by the three parties that would later coalesce as the Pakatan Rakyat.

† The vote and seat shares of the Pakatan Rakyat parties in 2008 include those of a socialist and an independent who ran on their tickets.

Until the 2008 voting, there had never been more than two opposition state governments at any one time, and the only question nationally was how wide would be the BN's final margin in Parliament. The mainstay of BN dominance has been a first-past-the-post electoral system freely salted with gerrymandered and other malapportioned constituencies designed to award the ruling coalition a hefty seat bonus. Coming out of the 2004 elections, for instance, the BN commanded a record-breaking parliamentary majority with nine out of every ten seats in the House of Representatives (Parliament's lower chamber) under its control, based on 63.8 percent of the popular vote. In 2008, the National Front could manage only 51.4 percent of the vote. Its seat bonus, although still substantial, gives it control over just 63 percent of the lower house, short of the all-important two-thirds majority.

The opposition bloc in the current, 222-member House, the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance), now holds 82 seats; its largest member is the People's Justice Party (PKR) of Anwar Ibrahim, which has 31 seats. The opposition's state-level victories may be its most impressive feats. Fully 43 percent of Malaysia's registered voters live in the five states that elected opposition governments, and two of the five—Penang and Selangor—are the richest in the country. Opposition candidates also notched a near-sweep in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (which is located geographically within Selangor), and now fill all but one of the capital territory's eleven House seats.

These remarkable results are perhaps best read as a repudiation of the authoritarian style of UMNO's Mahathir Mohamad, who served as premier from 1981 until his retirement in 2003. Mahathir was credited with fueling impressive economic growth by means of gigantic development projects and public-spending programs. Under his rule, Malaysia joined the ranks of the world's industrialized countries. In his eagerness to reach his goals, however, the physician-turned-politician never hesitated to assault or undermine any democratic institution that got in his way, eventually turning the UMNO-dominated Malaysian state into something resembling a personal dictatorship.<sup>1</sup> Mahathir had little respect for the rule of law, the sovereignty of Parliament, the independence of the judiciary, or the freedom of the media. He consolidated his grip on power by expanding the resources and authority of the prime minister's staff and creating institutions that answered directly to him.

As formidable a figure as Mahathir was, his tenure in office was not unmarked by conflict. There were two major outbreaks of trouble, one in the late 1980s, and one in the late 1990s. In each case, the infighting was triggered by immediate economic woes, but also fed by causes both structural and personal that stretched back several decades to 1969. On May 13 of that year, ethnic Malays angry at their own perceived economic deprivation had begun rioting against Malaysians of Indian and Chinese descent. In order to prevent fresh outbreaks of such strife, the government declared the New Economic Policy (NEP) to address Malay concerns. In an ironic way, the NEP approach of favoring ethnic Malays and other so-called *bumiputras* ("sons of the soil") would turn out to be the fountainhead of political pluralism in Malaysia. By turning UMNO and the state that it ran into a vast machine for pumping out patronage and rent-seeking opportunities, the NEP ensured heightened factional strife during tough economic times, when various groups within UMNO would find themselves battling over slices of a shrinking patronage pie.

The first wave of such infighting came in the wake of the worldwide recession of the early and middle 1980s. In 1987 intraparty voting, Mahathir only narrowly beat back a leadership challenge from Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, a prince from the northeastern state of Kelantan. Through a series of legal maneuvers during which the independence of the Malaysian judiciary wound up as collateral damage, Mahathir shut Tengku and his backers out of party ranks. Tengku thereupon formed a splinter party and went into opposition, but found himself demonized for appearing too close to a Christian minority group (more than 60 percent of Malaysia's 26 million people are Muslim). He returned to UMNO, a beaten man, in 1996.

### **Anwar Ibrahim's Challenge**

It would not be long, however, before the East Asian financial crisis of 1997 set off an even more bitter struggle for power in the higher

reaches of Malaysian politics. This one pitted Mahathir against his hand-picked heir apparent, Anwar Ibrahim. An Islamist firebrand in his youth, Anwar had benefited from Mahathir's need to sideline and weaken competitors such as Razaleigh and his erstwhile ally, Musa Hitam. Both an able lieutenant to Mahathir and a shrewd player on his own behalf, Anwar had become deputy president of UMNO and deputy premier of Malaysia by 1993. Looking for his own niche and message, he began to rebrand himself as a reformist and moderate, setting himself apart from his mentor by promoting engagement with civil society and participation in the "dialogue of civilizations."

Mahathir insisted that the financial crisis was part of a Western plot to recolonize Asia. Not unlike the advocates of *reformasi* in neighboring Indonesia, Anwar was more willing to cite problems closer to home, especially "corruption, cronyism, and nepotism" (KKN) in Malaysia's business and government circles. He was also readier to embrace the International Monetary Fund's neoliberal fiscal-austerity prescriptions than Mahathir, who rejected the Fund's advice and decided to adopt an unconventional approach centered on currency control. Some of Anwar's supporters began putting out word that it was time for the older man to step down.

On 2 September 1998, two days after Malaysian Independence Day, Mahathir unveiled his currency-control plan, and sacked Anwar. The younger man refused to go quietly, however, and soon the news was filled with rumored claims of sexual misconduct on his part. Most damagingly, he was accused of having sodomized an adoptive male relative as well as two male employees. Heterosexual affairs, like corruption and abuses of power, have long been seen as a common pastime among Malaysia's political class. The allegation of homosexuality was of another order, clearly having been meant to destroy Anwar's credibility in the eyes of conservative Muslims.

Anwar defiantly pressed on with a *reformasi*-style campaign, attacking the unholy KKN triumvirate. A decade earlier, Tengku Razaleigh had been able to rally about a quarter of former cabinet ministers to his side in the fight against Mahathir. Anwar had no such luck. Most of his senior political and business supporters melted away, frightened by the prospect of being dismissed from office; of being investigated by police, tax-collection, or anticorruption agencies; or of losing government contracts. In the event, a number of those who stuck by Anwar found themselves detained without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA). The weakness of Anwar's establishment support stood as stark evidence of how successful Mahathir had been at asserting control after Razaleigh's challenge.

Anwar had one tool that the aristocratic northern prince could never match, however—the ability to reach ordinary citizens. As Anwar traveled the country, his calls for reform struck a deep chord with many poor

## MAP—MALAYSIA



and middle-class Malays who knew that the UMNO patronage sluice was not for them and felt stuck at the wrong end of a growing income gap. On 20 September 1998, Anwar drew a stunningly huge crowd of two-hundred thousand to a reform rally at the National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur. That night, a nervous government sent masked commandos to storm his house and detained him under the ISA. Found guilty of abuse-of-power and sodomy charges, Anwar remained in jail until 2004, a year after Mahathir stepped down from power.

Anwar's arrest failed to stop his *reformasi* movement. Indeed, he probably gained support when it came out that authorities had blackened his left eye during questioning, and when the sodomy case against him began to show signs of having been deliberately fabricated (prosecutors had to amend the charges several times when the legal process brought factual discrepancies to light). Many Malays began to feel that the authorities' handling of Anwar was undermining an important cultural norm which holds that a ruler must always respect a subject's dignity, even when that subject has erred. Mahathir was seen to have breached this implicit social contract.

Anwar had built a rapport with human-rights activists, the leftist Malaysian People's Party (PRM), and the secular, social-democratic, and predominantly Sino-Malaysian Democratic Action Party (DAP). While he was in prison, his previously apolitical eye-surgeon wife built the new National Justice Party (PKN) out of former UMNO cadres, NGO activists and leftists, and even members of the Islamic movement that Anwar had headed in his youth. This nascent party (it would eventually merge with the PRM to form the PKR) became the centerpiece of the Alternative Front (BA) coalition, which included the DAP as well as an Islamist formation known as Parti Islam or PAS.

As the 1999 elections approached, Mahathir's UMNO-BN regime again found itself facing a serious challenge. If wary Malays had saved Mahathir from the first challenge, this time the rescuers would be non-Malays made anxious by the idea of change after the anti-Chinese rioting that occurred in neighboring Indonesia in May 1998. Anwar's coalition had taken a line supportive of minorities, but the possibility that

PAS might push Islamization remained worrisome. Meanwhile, business interests appreciated Mahathir's efforts to save enterprises from having to shut down in the face of the crisis, as the usual IMF recipe recommended.

Still, the BA did remarkably well, winning 42 seats, or about a fifth of the lower house. But the coalition was marked by an imbalance—the PAS had 27 seats and Anwar's party only 5 seats—that Mahathir could exploit. Emboldened by its strong showing but remote from the prospect of holding office, the PAS played to its gallery by pushing Islamization. The secular DAP's September 2001 walkout over this policy effectively ended the BA's appeal to non-Malays. Mahathir then made a calculated move to steal the PAS's thunder and bait it toward extremism by trumpeting his claim that there was no need to build an Islamic state, since Malaysia *already* had become one, thanks to him.

The BA coalition may have been reduced to ruins, but ominously for Mahathir, neither the sentiments that fueled it nor the infrastructure of opposition that it had fostered went away with its collapse. On the contrary, the anti-Mahathir websites that had been instrumental in inflicting electoral pain on UMNO in 1999 continued to function. Confronted with eroding support among Malays, the ruling party's countermove was to whip up interethnic distrust and fear by accusing Sino-Malaysians of seeking to exploit divisions among their ethnic-Malay neighbors. Suqiu, a reform-minded coalition of Chinese organizations, was demonized as a threat to national security and ethnic harmony comparable to communist insurgents and religious fanatics. Such wild accusations alienated many Sino-Malaysians who had voted for the BN in 1999.

Despite Mahathir's maneuverings, it was clear that he had become a drag on the BN's electoral prospects. Thus he announced in mid-2002 that he would retire, and actually stepped down in October 2003. Abdullah Badawi, Mahathir's handpicked successor, had been a Razaleigh backer before casting his lot with Mahathir's camp.

### Failed Promises, Failed Policies

The mild-mannered, technocratic Abdullah—known as “Pak (Uncle) Lah” among Malaysians—was eager to present himself as a reformist ready to make a clean break from two decades of Mahathir's arrogant strongman posturing. The only other candidate, Najib Razak, the son of the second prime minister, was tainted by sex and corruption scandals as well as a youth spent agitating on behalf of Malay ultranationalism.

Hailing from a family of Muslim clerics, Abdullah had better credentials than his predecessor for facing down PAS and the Islamist challenge. Pious yet moderate, Pak Lah spoke calmly of “Islam hadhari” (civilizational Islam) and seemed to want to make a devout yet forward-

looking approach to the religion one of his bequests to his 60 percent Muslim nation.

In more secular matters, the new premier gently urged his fellow citizens to “work with me, not for me,” and vowed to be “the prime minister for all Malaysians.” His main promise was to get rid of the rampant abuses of power and corrupt practices that infected the Malaysian state from its highest offices to its lowest. He vowed institutional reforms of a police force long known for its brutality and dishonesty. By quietly accepting the Supreme Court’s decision, handed down a few months after the 2004 elections, to overturn Anwar’s sodomy conviction, Abdullah was widely seen as closing the book on another of Mahathir’s excesses.

Abdullah’s moderation and friendlier tone paid off big at the polls in 2004, leaving BN with its largest majority ever. The PAS fell from 27 seats to 6, while the PKR was left with only a single seat, held by Anwar Ibrahim’s wife. Within months, however, Abdullah was squandering his colossal mandate and leaving the reform-minded public in a state of deep and bitter disappointment.

Abdullah’s first mistake was his conspicuous failure, after pushback from senior police officials, to establish the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission that he had promised. His drive to root out graft never really took off and, more damagingly still, his son was named in a corruption scandal involving the illicit nuclear-technology network run by Pakistani atomic-weapons scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan. Abdullah’s Oxford-educated son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin, also began drawing criticism for his ambition and arrogance, as well as charges that he had acted as a “fixer” in the awarding of major government contracts.

The new premier’s second mistake was to stir the wrath of Mahathir by canceling some of the latter’s pet development projects, including the construction of a new bridge to replace the causeway that links southern Malaysia to Singapore. The retired UMNO leader publicly accused his successor of weakness and said that choosing Abdullah as his successor had been “a mistake.” Mahathir claimed that the “Fourth Floor Boys”—shorthand for Khairy Jamaluddin and his circle—were running Abdullah’s government. Mahathir even took his campaign of denunciation online, starting a blog with numerous posts attacking the Abdullah administration and suggesting that people should stop voting for the BN.

Abdullah’s biggest blunder may have been his failure to steer the country toward a more amicable state of ethnosectarian relations. During his term, Islamic radicals in the government began to assert themselves. There were several high-profile cases in which people who had formally converted to Islam (as required by law) in order to marry a Muslim were refused permission to leave Islam after the spouse died or the marriage ended in divorce. In another case that caused wide anguish, Islamic authorities insisted on a Muslim burial for a man whose Hindu

widow claimed that he had held Hindu beliefs and practiced Hindu rites, and hence would not have wished for a Muslim funeral.

On Abdullah's watch, UMNO heightened ethnic tensions when delegates to its 2005 annual meeting attacked the non-Malay, non-Muslim community openly in their speeches. Malaysians of Chinese and Indians descent were referred to as *pendatang* (recent arrivals) and warned that blood would flow should they offer any challenge to *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay political supremacy) or the special rights that ethnic Malays enjoy under Article 153 of the Constitution of 1957. A senior UMNO leader who was also education minister even brandished a *keris* (a traditional Malay dagger) from the podium during his speech, a gesture widely interpreted as a death threat against non-Malays who might think of opposing his party. (He repeated the same stunt on national television at the next year's party congress.) Memories of the 13 May 1969 race riots and the hundreds of non-Malays killed in them run strong in Malaysia's minority communities. They are inclined to view with alarm any warning from UMNO, whether veiled or blatant, that "another May 13" could break out if non-Malays demand political equality too strenuously.

### Rallies and Bloggers

The BN's sense of invincibility was evident in the first half of 2007. Anwar Ibrahim had by then revived the PKR and brought all three of the main opposition parties into tacit cooperation, yet the BN was still easily sweeping all by-elections. Anwar, with his brand of new politics and his fierce criticisms of UMNO, was receiving rock-star treatment from rural Chinese young people at Alternative Front election rallies. Yet neither he nor his party could make serious inroads among Malay voters.

By September, however, the whole political climate had changed. The catalyst was Anwar's decision to release a video clip showing prominent lawyer V.K. Lingam on the phone, brokering Supreme Court appointments. The government's lukewarm response roused suspicion that the scandal would be buried, like most scandals involving the ruling coalition. The Bar Council, representing the legal profession, sponsored a march of two-thousand lawyers and concerned citizens in Putrajaya, the administrative capital built by Mahathir. It was easily the largest demonstration by Malaysian lawyers in living memory.

There soon followed an even larger demonstration, organized by the NGO umbrella group known as the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH). On November 10, about fifty-thousand people—mostly Malay supporters of the PAS and PKR, but with a significant admixture of middle-class urbanites from various ethnic groups—marched to the royal palace to offer the constitutional monarch a memorandum on electoral reforms. The combination of Abdullah's lackluster approach to reform and BERSIH's relentless exposures of electoral fraud was moving a large

slice of the voting public to mobilize in defense of democratic rights. The police tried to prevent the march, but the number of marchers was too large. Held in the wake of UMNO's annual meeting and Abdullah's stern warning that he loathed being challenged ("pantang dicabar"), this peaceful protest pointed to the emergence of a new Middle Malaysia that was intent on reviving the *reformasi* calls of a decade earlier.

Two weeks later, on November 25, came a third remarkable demonstration. This one was the work of the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), a communal movement that had rocketed to national prominence within just months. In recent years, Malaysians of Indian background (about 7 percent of the total population) had come to feel themselves severely marginalized both economically and politically. Most disaffected of all were predominantly Hindu Tamil speakers. Many of them were the children of plantation workers who had found themselves forced into the cities with little support when plantation estates were redeveloped. Lacking both the government programs that the Malays count on and the large numbers of affluent ethnic compatriots that the Chinese look to for help, working-class Indo-Malaysians felt beleaguered. The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) belonged to the BN, but was powerless. Its aging leader, Samy Vellu, was generally regarded as more interested in keeping his job than in helping his fellow Indo-Malaysians.<sup>2</sup> Already predominant targets of police misconduct as well as the efforts of Islamic extremists intent on imposing Muslim burial customs and even the forced conversion of children, Indo-Malaysians were galvanized as never before when local authorities began systematically demolishing Hindu temples.

Making a bizarre demand that the British government—the colonial-era force behind Indian migration to the Malay Peninsula—should pay compensation for having abandoned its erstwhile Indo-Malayan subjects to postcolonial discrimination, HINDRAF mobilized thirty-thousand protestors to flood central Kuala Lumpur from the British High Commission to the Petronas Towers, the soaring twin skyscrapers that form the iconic symbol of modern Malaysia. The use by police of tear gas and water cannons against orderly marchers carrying nothing more menacing than pictures of Gandhi and a petition addressed to the Queen of England shocked the country and electrified the entire Indo-Malaysian community. On that day, the BN lost ethnic-Indian voters, its most loyal constituency for half a century.

Large demonstrations are rare in Malaysia. To have three such big protests within a short span was unheard of. Together, they showed the country at large that opposition to the BN regime was crystallizing. They also energized urban young people. Many of these were avid Internet users and frequent readers of the mushrooming political weblogs which, together with a handful of online news portals, were providing an alternative to the tightly controlled mainstream print and broadcast me-

dia. The online media were unafraid to discuss sensitive subjects such as high-level corruption, abuses of power, ethnic discrimination, police brutality, religious controversies, and racist remarks by UMNO politicians. Political bloggers, including Raja Petra Kamaruddin (Malaysia-Today), Haris Ibrahim (People's Parliament), and Jeff Ooi (Screenshots), plus opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, helped to create a major shift among the middle class and sent many concerned citizens into political action.

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Abdullah's decision to dissolve Parliament in mid-February 2008 in preparation for March elections was the fruit of fatal overconfidence. In addition to the Lingam scandal, Mahathir's constant attacks, the surging discontent signaled by the three demonstrations, the rise of political blogs, and Anwar's success at

rallying the opposition parties, world oil prices began to spiral upward, driving painful inflation. The ordinary voter could only blame the BN government, while opposition backers began to quip that BN stood not for "Barisan Nasional" but rather "Barang Naik" (Rising Prices).

The BN, in other words, was sailing into a perfect storm with an oblivious captain at the helm. Had UMNO not won in a landslide as recently as 2004, and had it not swept a series of by-elections since? What could there be to worry about? Cushioned by this false sense of invincibility, UMNO's leaders ignored warnings from their junior partners in the BN coalition and forged ahead with plans for a nationwide vote (in their defense, one might note that not a single public commentator foresaw the massive loss that lay in wait).

The ensuing ballot-box debacle left the BN's non-Malay parties in peninsular Malaysia most severely wounded, while the ruling coalition's parties in the states of Sarawak and Sabah on the north shore of the island of Borneo (known together with a nearby federal territory as East Malaysia) emerged almost unscathed. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the BN's second-largest party, dropped from 31 to 15 seats, while the MIC and Gerakan (a smaller Sino-Malaysian party) were nearly wiped out. Anwar's opposition alliance made deep inroads into ethnically mixed constituencies that had long been BN strongholds, and actually nosed out the BN on the peninsula by winning just over 50 percent of the total popular vote there. Gerakan had ruled the northwestern peninsular state of Penang on the Strait of Malacca for forty years running, yet in 2008 it could not win a single seat there. What saved BN from not merely losing its two-thirds majority but actually being

consigned to minority status was the solid support it retained in Sabah and Sarawak. At the federal level, consequently, the BN ceased being a national coalition and found itself reduced instead to a regional pact between UMNO's ethnic-Malay base on the peninsula and East Malaysia. The East thenceforth stood out as the obvious swing region whose ability and willingness to defect from the BN would necessarily become topics of urgent concern to UMNO's leaders.

### **Abdullah's Fall, Anwar's Rise**

In the blame game that began almost as soon as the shocking results were in, the non-Malay junior parties were as one in castigating UMNO for their losses. They cited *ketuanan Melayu* as the main problem, complaining that it caused non-Malays to feel like second-class citizens in their own country. While some UMNO leaders including Abdullah talked about the need for reforms, many others took refuge in the strange notion that the problem was merely the inability of the BN's non-Malay parties to "properly explain" the government's discriminatory policies to their coethnics.

Within UMNO itself, Mahathir and his son Mukhriz, a newly elected member of Parliament, continued to inveigh against Abdullah and his son-in-law. Mukhriz wrote an open letter calling on Badawi to do the "right thing" and resign. After a series of closed-door meetings, Abdullah agreed to step down in June 2010, whereupon his deputy Najib would take over as premier and head of the party. Abdullah even immediately switched cabinet posts with Najib, handing him the Finance Ministry and taking on Najib's defense portfolio. Mahathir remained unmollified, however, charging that the longer the discredited Abdullah stayed in power, the more tempted would BN parliamentarians become to cross over to the opposition. Next, the retired strongman announced that he was quitting UMNO in protest. When party senior vice-president and power broker Muhyiddin Yasin changed his stance and began saying that 2010 was too far away, Abdullah's time began to run out. Sensing where most of the party now stood, Najib quietly told Abdullah that the 2010 date was no longer tenable. Pak Lah had no choice but to relinquish power to Najib on 3 April 2009. Mahathir had won, albeit on the dubious theory that his successor's personal failings as a leader were UMNO's only real problem.

Abdullah's legacy will be mixed. He will most likely be seen as one who never really stood a chance when it came to filling Mahathir's oversized shoes. He made a respectable early try at undoing some of Mahathir's excesses, but his weak leadership style left him no match for the rough-and-tumble of UMNO's internal politics. The party had fed for so long on patronage and ethnocentrism that any attempt at reform was sure to provoke strong resistance. Abdullah simply did not have the

strong (even Mahathir-like) personality that would have been needed to force reforms through. So he ended up doing too little and will likely go down in history as a transitional figure in Malaysian politics, a leader who meant well but could not follow through.

On the opposition side there was understandable euphoria, followed by the drama over Anwar's return to Parliament. He had been barred by law from running in 2008 because of his prior conviction on corruption charges. The government, still intent on stopping him, launched another sodomy prosecution (a new court case was expected to open in July 2009). Anwar responded by ratcheting up the pressure on the government, openly telling the foreign press that more than thirty BN legislators were ready to cross the House floor by 16 September 2008—the pan-Malaysian Independence Day—and enable him to form a government. Anwar promised that once in power, he would replace the *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay political supremacy) with *ketuanan rakyat* (the supremacy of the people). On 27 August 2008, he resoundingly won a House by-election that his wife had made possible by resigning her seat, and shortly thereafter he became the official leader of the parliamentary opposition.<sup>3</sup> September 16 came and went, but the widely expected defections did not occur. It is likely that Anwar had never expected them to occur, but had been talking them up as part of a push to destabilize UMNO.

## A Changed Landscape

Since March 2008, Malaysia's political landscape has changed forever. An old order has passed, but what will take its place remains unclear. Are we, as many hope, witnessing the birth of a genuine two-party system and hence a more democratic society? Certainly, there are grounds for optimism that this is happening, and that the next elections may actually bring about a peaceful transfer of power to the opposition.

First, the voting trend among the young is unmistakable. Polling data from the 2008 general elections and subsequent by-elections show a clear alignment of younger voters with the opposition coalition. There are more than four million eligible citizens who have not registered to vote. Many of these are young people, and the opposition parties have begun seeking them out in registration drives that promise the BN more problems at the polls.

Second, Anwar's coalition appears to be holding together. He and his centrist PKR have been instrumental in bridging and moderating the ideological differences between PAS and DAP. February 2009 developments in the large northwestern state of Perak, however, suggest that the existence of a common enemy (UMNO and the BN) plus the prospect of power form the strongest glue. The Pakatan Rakyat state government there was dominated by the DAP but headed by a PAS leader, Mohamad

Nizar.<sup>4</sup> In February, the BN managed to persuade two PKR state legislators plus one from the DAP to defect, thereby robbing the opposition of its three-seat majority. The local sultan, Perak's constitutional monarch, then rejected Chief Minister Nizar's request to dissolve the legislature, ordering him instead to resign, and installed a new Perak state government headed by UMNO. Nizar and his cabinet stood defiantly against this palace coup, and in doing so began to attract support from non-Malays who before then had traditionally been suspicious of the PAS and its Islamist rhetoric. In an April 2009 by-election for the federal Parliament—waged as a referendum on the coup in Perak—Nizar's share of the Sino-Malaysian vote reached 80 percent, a figure unheard of for a PAS candidate. This suggests that the brief period of PAS-DAP-PKR cohabitation may have produced a new coalition of Malays and non-Malays longing for democracy and change. The danger, of course, is that Anwar may be essential for keeping the opposition alliance together. Should anything happen to him, the alliance could lose steam or even fall apart.

Third, any reforms that UMNO and the BN undertake are likely to be cosmetic and short of what voters want. The *ketuanan Melayu* ideology and the NEP's racially discriminatory policies in favor of Malays are at the very heart of UMNO's whole reason for being. Malays in general, and UMNO members in particular, derive numerous tangible benefits from this arrangement. Some have even become millionaires thanks to it. Expecting them to stand by quietly while it is dismantled is simply not realistic. Patronage politics is hard-wired into the UMNO and BN party machinery; no party leader who tries to rip this infrastructure out is likely to survive politically. New prime minister Najib Razak talks about the need to build "one Malaysia"—his way of signaling the shift toward the middle that he wishes his party to make amid the worldwide economic crisis in which his country now finds itself caught. But even as Najib makes these promising-sounding noises, his deputy Muhyiddin Yasin steps on the message by accusing the ethnic Chinese who voted against the BN in the Perak by-election of ingratitude to the government.

Will the end of UMNO-BN's one-party dominance guarantee the survival of the two-coalition system for which many Malaysians hope? The Perak by-election results, which come from a mixed constituency where about 63 percent of the registered voters are Malay, suggest that Pakatan Rakyat can count on winning around 40 percent of the Malay vote even when UMNO makes a major issue out of the opposition coalition's ethnically inclusive policies. The results also suggest that the BN will find itself hard-pressed to win 30 percent of non-Malay votes. Should UMNO and the BN fail to reform, that 30 percent figure could dip even lower, and UMNO might find its base confined to pockets of the Malay heartland while its non-Malay partners suffer total annihilation.<sup>5</sup> With-

out its non-Malay allied parties, UMNO would have no prospect of returning to power and could even drift further toward the farther reaches of ethnonationalism. The result would be a multiethnic centrist coalition of the PKR, PAS, and DAP facing off against an unelectable Malay ultranationalist opposition. One dominant coalition would have replaced another, but Malaysian politics would still not be as competitive as they should be.

Among the reflections that might be drawn from consideration of the development and possible trajectory of democratization in Malaysia, two seem especially worthy of comment. First, a free flow of information can play a key role in strengthening the democratic opposition. Without the Internet, the opposition would not have been able to get its message across, and more importantly, the BN regime's misdeeds and corruption would not have been exposed. It was, arguably, precisely such exposures—the Lingam tape being the most notorious among many—that drove the middle class as well as sections of the working class toward a major change in attitudes and voting behavior. Many realized for the first time that real democracy and good governance go hand-in-hand. Voters came to see that having only one party in power for more than a half-century is a bad idea.

Second, unless a new cleavage emerges to cut across ethnosectarian boundaries, the electoral sea change of 2008 may augur only a shift in players, not a transformation of the game itself. If non-Malays, seeing how the BN has failed them in so many respects, choose to abandon it completely, the upshot will still be governance by a single dominant coalition, albeit a fairer and more benign one in the form of Pakatan Rakyat. If UMNO survives as a monoethnic opposition party, it is likely to attack PKR and PAS as traitors to Malaysia's Malay-Muslim majority; the politics of communal resentments will remain alive and kicking. A system where two main parties or coalitions square off against each other on fairly competitive terms will be possible only if there arises centripetal competition among Malay-based parties strong enough to attract and divide large numbers of non-Malay voters. Bringing about this state of things, however, may well require more than just a one-time electoral tsunami. It may take sustained and serious institutional engineering.

## NOTES

1. For a detailed account, see In-Won Hwang, *Personalized Politics: The Malaysian State Under Mahathir* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003).

2. In March 2009, Samy Vellu was reelected as MIC president for the tenth time, on this latest occasion after his opponent suffered disqualification on dubious technical grounds. Vellu is the only party president that the MIC has had for three decades.

3. The electoral ban on Anwar expired in April 2008, but his wife only vacated the

Permatang Pauh seat—which he had held from 1982 to 1998—for him to run after the government came up with the so-called Sodomy II case against him.

4. With 19 seats, the DAP was the largest party in the Pakatan Rakyat coalition; the PKR and the PAS won only 7 and 6 seats, respectively. The DAP could not place a member in the chief minister's post, however, because all its lawmakers were ethnic Chinese and not Muslims, while a clause in the state's constitution says that a non-Muslim can hold the top executive job only with a waiver from the sultan. After some horse-trading, the three parties appointed Nizar, an engineer by trade, as chief minister while the DAP took over most of the state cabinet positions and the leadership of the state legislative assembly.

5. Since East Malaysians tend to dislike UMNO's Malay-centrist and peninsula-centrist policies, it is unlikely that UMNO will be able to count on the continued loyalty of its East Malaysian allies should UMNO lose the seat majority that it currently holds in peninsular Malaysia.