



Malaysia's 2004 General Elections: Spectacular Victory, Continuing Tensions

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ABSTRACT. The new Malaysian Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, after approximately five months in office, led the ruling coalition—*Barisan Nasional* (National Front [BN]) into the country's eleventh general elections in March 2004. The BN won spectacularly. The electoral success has been attributed as much to Abdullah's reform initiatives, which included war against graft in public and private sectors, efforts to improve public delivery system and continued commitment to growth-oriented economic policies, as to his own "clean" image. Further, his pronouncement of *Islam Hadhari* (Civilizational Islam), a progressive Islam suited to the modern times, counterbalanced the espousal of a theocratic Islamic state agenda by the opposition, *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party [PAS]). This struck a chord with the majority Malay/Muslim voters and led to the impressive electoral performance of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in Malay-majority constituencies, which seemed to spell an end to the "Malay cultural revolt" against the dominant Malay party caused by the sacking, arrest and imprisonment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The spectacular victory, however, belied continuing tensions in Malaysian politics where the fault lines are being drawn less along narrow ethnic struggle, than between contending discourses of democracy, religious identity and economic development. The election results seem to reinforce politics beyond ethnicity which has been unfolding since the 1990s.

KEYWORDS. Malaysia · electoral politics · ethnicity · democracy

INTRODUCTION

In October 2003, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad resigned after 22 years in office. He was succeeded by his deputy, and former antagonist, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who in the 1987 United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party election teamed up with Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah to challenge Mahathir. Abdullah won one of the three vice-presidential seats, while Razaleigh lost in his bid to unseat the incumbent president, Mahathir, by a slim 43-vote majority.

Dubbed as “Mr. Clean” and “Mr. Nice Guy” by his supporters, Abdullah was expected to overhaul the government, which staunchest critics alleged as corrupt and authoritarian during the Mahathir years. After approximately five months in office, Abdullah led the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (National Front [BN]) into the country’s eleventh general election and won spectacularly. The “Pak Lah factor,” which refers to the personality and reform initiatives of the new leader, coupled with institutionalized political control of the Mahathir era, helped the BN return to power. The UMNO’s impressive performance in Malay-majority constituencies, except in the east coast states of peninsular Malaysia where contests for Malay votes remained intense, seemed to spell an end to the “Malay cultural revolt” against the ruling BN caused by the sacking, arrest and imprisonment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The spectacular victory, however, belied continuing tensions in Malaysian politics. Given BN’s safe fortress increasingly shifting away from large Malay-majority constituencies to ethnically mixed ones and the opposition’s keen espousal of democratic values and religious identity against the seemingly authoritarian and morally corrupt BN government, the fault lines in Malaysian politics are less being drawn along narrow ethnic struggle than contending discourses of democracy, religious identity and economic development. This politics beyond ethnicity which has been emerging since the 1990s seems to persist and reinforce itself in the lead-up and aftermath of the 2004 general elections.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF MALAYSIA’S ELECTORAL POLITICS

Malaysia’s electoral politics prior to the 1990s has been described mainly in terms of the centrality of ethnicity in forging formidable coalition of political parties and the limit to democratic practices (Vorys 1975, Lipjhart 1977, Crouch 1980, Mauzy 1983, Zakaria 1989). Up to the 1970s, the ethnic factor was entrenched in the practice of “consociational democracy,” which means a system in which “the centrifugal tendencies inherent in a plural society are counteracted by the cooperative attitudes and behavior of the leaders of different segments of the population” (Lijphart 1977, 1). The same system was captured by Vorys (1975, 13) as a “democracy without consensus,” in which the “democratic system is not based on a national community” but rather “on a cooperation of discrete communal

groups,” the main device of which is a “grand coalition” comprising of political leaders of each communal group. Three main ethnic groups that formed Malaysia’s plural society after independence in 1957—the Malays, Chinese and Indians—through their respective ethnic-based political parties, namely, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (formerly Malayan Chinese Association [MCA]) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) formed a coalition of multiethnic political parties, the Alliance, which functioned as the all-important consociational device. The underlying rule of interethnic bargaining through the Alliance was a trade-off between the indigenous Malays’ political superiority and the Chinese’s political and economic rights in the new nation. The Indians, being the smallest of the three ethnic groups and did not constitute the majority in any single electoral constituency in the country, had little bearing over the trade-off. This consociational model, however, collapsed in May 1969 after a bloody racial riot erupted in Kuala Lumpur, preceded by a communally divisive campaign in the run-up to the 1969 general elections.

In the post-1969 politics, a new formula of interethnic power bargaining was put in place. At the political level, the existing Alliance parties were to unite with the opposition out-bidders in a new “grand coalition.” At the socioeconomic level, a new deal was to replace the dysfunctional old constitutional contract in regard to the trade-off between the Chinese and the Malays. The former had culminated in the formation of BN in 1974. The new coalition co-opted two major multiracial but predominantly non-Malay opposition parties, the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) and the *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (Malaysian People’s Movement [Gerakan]), and the only Malay/Muslim opposition party, *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (Pan-Malayan Islamic Party [PAS]). The government also introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970, the main thrust of which was to “restructure the society” so as to eliminate the identification of race with economic functions. Implicitly, it aimed at improving economic achievements of the *bumiputeras* (sons of the soil), Malays and indigenous peoples in the east Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, vis-à-vis the Chinese through entrenched state intervention. It was against this backdrop that literatures explaining Malaysian politics in the 1970s took account of the increasing dominance of Malay and UMNO political power within the BN and incremental authoritarianism in the political system (Crouch, Lee, and Ong 1980, Mauzy 1983). The Malay

political power was further amplified through delineation of electoral constituencies, which has been defectively proportioned to tilt the balance in favor of predominantly Malay rural areas (Lim 2003). This was understandable given the fact that Malay-majority constituencies, due to the NEP politics that favored the Malays, became the natural bastion of BN's political power. The opposite was true for predominantly non-Malay urban constituencies, which saw the opposition, especially the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), often making successful bid in its electoral contests for Chinese votes. Amplifying Malay political power, in this sense, made political competition safer for the BN while perpetuating UMNO's dominance in the ruling coalition.

"New politics," however, has been unfolding since the early nineties. As Loh Kok Wah observes, in this new epoch, ethnicity no longer overwhelms the other discourses of Malaysian politics. The discourse of developmentalism, "which valorizes rapid economic growth, rising living standards, and the resultant consumerist habits," has been gaining primacy instead (Loh Kok Wah 2003, 278). This cultural corollary of developmental state shows strong preference for political stability and economic growth, which are often associated with the BN. Of particular note is the changing voting behavior among Chinese voters who began to switch their support away from the opposition to the BN due to favorable post-NEP economic, education, and cultural policies as well as the public goods offered by service-oriented Chinese-based BN political parties. Up to the 1995 general elections, the BN fared handsomely in both Malay and non-Malay-majority areas.

This, however, does not suggest that electoral politics has become less contentious in Malaysia. At least two emerging trends are shaping the present landscape of Malaysia's electoral politics (Welsh 2003). First, the growing middle class, who often desire political stability, economic growth, and the consequent maintenance of the status quo, has also been pushing for more political openness and civil liberties. Second, as rapid urbanization frayed distinctive customs that previously marked the ethnic divide, religion has become the defining "ethnic marker;" Muslim/non-Muslim polarity "will likely dominate political discourse and move campaigns away from questions of language policy or ethnic distribution to contests for religious supremacy" (Welsh 2003, 121). These centrifugal forces within society had pushed the Malaysian state to adopt seemingly contradictory policies, from the espousal of Islam to the pursuit of secular economic development akin

to a “syncretic state,” in order to fragment the opposition. Jessudason (1996) describes the Malaysian syncretic state as one which operates at a multidimensional level, mixing coercive elements with electoral and democratic procedures; propagates religion in society as it pursues secular economic goals; engages in ethnic mobilization while inculcating national feelings; and pursues a combination of economic practices ranging from liberal capitalism, state economic intervention, to rentier arrangements. The government also often responded to the people’s plight for a better quality of life while at the same time maintained laws that curtail freedom and human rights, thus fitting neatly into a “repressive-responsive” model of political regime (Crouch 1996). It is justifiable to say that the government has been capitalizing as much on the fragmented opposition as on the ambiguities of the political system to remain in power.

It was amidst these fragmentation and ambiguities that the BN had to face the “Anwar factor” and the *reformasi* (reforms) wave, following the sacking and arrest of the former deputy premier in September 1998. The *reformasi* put opposition’s fragmentation and government’s political ambiguities to test. It was in the days street protests erupted in the capital city Kuala Lumpur demanding for Mahathir’s resignation and Anwar’s release that the government came down hard on protesters and opposition leaders. Hundreds were arrested under criminal law mainly for participating in unlawful assembly and causing violence, while some key opposition and nongovernmental organization leaders were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act. The government unveiled its authoritarian face more explicitly than its ambiguousness amidst resounding call for democracy and justice.

The *reformasi* wave also witnessed the formation of cross-ethnic and cross-sectional alliances of opposition political parties and nongovernmental organizations, hence breaking the rule of a fragmented opposition. The most significant of all was the formation of a coalition of main opposition political parties, the *Barisan Alternatif* (Alternative Front [BA]), which is comprised of social democratic groups, but predominantly the Chinese DAP, Islamic PAS and leftist *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* (Malaysian People Party [PRM]). Another member of the BA was the fledgling multiracial National Justice Party (now People’s Justice Party) or *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*, which was formed by Anwar’s supporters and led by his wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. The BA was an incubator for ideologically divergent and politically fragmented opposition to build a single cohesive front as an alternative to the BN.

The resounding call for democracy and the first time ever single opposition front, however, failed to unseat the BN in November 1999

general elections. The BN maintained its two-thirds majority in the Parliament by winning 148 of 193 seats. It formed government in all states except in two east coast predominantly Malay states of Kelantan and Terengganu, which fell to the opposition Islamic party PAS. UMNO, however, suffered a serious setback. It faced the “most historic challenge” in Malay-majority constituencies, mainly due to dissatisfaction among the Malays with Mahathir’s treatment of Anwar (Maznah 2003). The “Malay cultural revolt” saw the party reduce its overall share of popular votes from 36.5 percent in 1995 to 29.5 percent in 1999. Apart from maintaining power in Kelantan and capturing Terengganu, UMNO’s arch rival PAS managed to win eight of 15 parliamentary seats in Kedah, the home state of Mahathir. In the July 2002 Pendang parliamentary seat by-election, held after the death of its former member of Parliament and PAS president Fadzil Noor the BN wrested control of the seat from PAS with a slim majority of 283 votes.

The opposition won 12 of 36 state seats in Kedah, one seat short of denying the BN of its two-thirds majority in the state’s legislature. Interestingly, in the by-election for Lunas state constituency in Kedah in November 2002, BN candidate lost to Saifuddin Nasution of *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (People’s Justice Party), commonly known as Keadilan, leaving BN with less than two-thirds majority in the state assembly. Wan Azizah won the Malay-majority Permatang Pauh parliamentary seat held by Anwar since 1982. Within 58 Malay-majority parliamentary seats in the peninsula, UMNO’s share of popular votes dropped from 62 percent in 1995 to 49 percent. This was translated into 31 seats won by the opposition and 27 by UMNO. The opposition not only won handsomely in traditional Malay heartland states in the north and the east coast of the peninsular, but also made successful inroads into a number of central west coast states, the hitherto BN’s strongholds.

The 1999 general election results indicate that the Malay ground can no longer be considered safe for the BN. As the BN prepared for the 2004 general elections, such apprehension was still fresh in its leaders’ minds. Bringing the lost Malay ground back to the BN’s fold was therefore a maiden test for Abdullah as the new Prime Minister, the BN chairman and, more importantly, UMNO president-in-waiting. UMNO’s performance in Malay-majority constituencies was an important barometer to gauge Abdullah’s capability to lead the dominant Malay party in his own right, a crucial mandate that he sought from delegates to the party election held in September 2004.

PREELECTORAL DEVELOPMENTS

The BN has been consolidating its hold on power soon after it suffered drawbacks in the 1999 general elections. The ruling coalition won all three parliamentary by-elections held between 1999 and 2004. In six state by-elections held in the same period, the BN managed to retain four of five seats it won in 1999. It lost one seat to Keadilan and failed to wrest control of another from PAS. Out of the nine contests, three were in Malay-majority constituencies, two in Chinese-majority, one in Muslim *bumiputera*-majority, and three in mixed-constituencies. The BN won two of three contests each in Malay-majority and mixed constituencies and thrived in all contests in Chinese and Muslim *bumiputera*-majority constituencies.

Within the BN, rejuvenation efforts among its main component parties loomed large. Of particular interest were developments inside UMNO. Judging from its lackluster performance in Malay-majority constituencies in the 1999 general elections, the party took serious efforts to persuade Malay voters, particularly Malay women and youth, many of whom had been instrumental in the rise of the reform movement following the Anwar ouster. A committee headed by Vice-President Muhyiddin Yassin held a nationwide tour in late 2000 to gather feedback from party grassroots on ways to improve the party's performance. The committee received radical suggestions, which included holding Supreme Council elections at divisional rather than national level and increasing the term of Supreme Council and division leaders to between four to five years from the current three-year term. The former was to make vote-buying more difficult and to empower wider support base, while the latter was to reduce excessive intra-party politicking in the run-up to party polls, which has been the root cause of money politics and in-fighting that weakened the party. None of these suggestions, however, were adopted in UMNO's special general assembly held in June 2002. Less radical suggestions, however, managed to make their way into the amended party constitution. These included the establishment of *Puteri* (Princess) UMNO, a young women's wing equal in status with the existing UMNO Youth, and the setting up of an independent disciplinary board whose members would be appointed among non-Supreme Council members. While *Puteri* UMNO was entrusted to woo more young Malay women into the party, a task which could hardly be accomplished by the older *Wanita* (Women's) Wing, the independent disciplinary board was expected to improve transparency and accountability in the party. The

party, however, was not moving in any direction that significantly reformed itself. It remained least democratic when the tradition of not challenging the president and deputy president in triennial party polls was perpetuated. Aspirants to Supreme Council posts also needed to receive enough nominations to be eligible for the contest. The regulation, which was first introduced through amendment to party constitution in December 1998, requires aspirants for the post of president to secure at least 30 percent nominations from all party divisions, 20 percent for deputy president, 15 percent for vice president, and 5 percent for Supreme Council member. In the 2000 party poll, Mahathir and Abdullah Badawi won unchallenged in the president and deputy president posts respectively when Tengku Razaleigh, the seemingly unwilling contestant, received only one nomination for the president post and two for deputy president, thus rendering himself not eligible for the contest. The much celebrated rejuvenation was perhaps the leadership succession in October 2003 when Abdullah Badawi took over the party's helm from Mahathir. In his first address to supporters in his home state Penang, he extolled leadership through consultation and urged party members to work with him instead of for him, a style different from his predecessor's tight-fisted approach to leadership.

The MCA's good showing in the 1999 general elections has taken its toll on the party. There has been growing expectation among its members that the party should be given more representation in the government. This included an extra federal cabinet post and a Chief Minister post in the predominantly Chinese state of Penang. The demand, however, was not well-received by the then-Prime Minister Mahathir who insisted that existing allocation of government posts to BN component parties should remain. Frustration over the failure to secure extra government positions, apparently to accommodate leaders of rival factions within the party, turned to anger when Deputy President Lim Ah Lek openly criticized Ling Liong Sik, the party president, for the latter's too compromising attitude in pursuing the demand. Reacting to his critics, Ling tendered his resignation as Transport Minister in May 2000 to allow Lim's ally, the Vice-President and Deputy Finance Minister Chan Kong Choy to take over the cabinet post vacated by him. In a turn of events, Ling retracted his resignation citing overwhelming support he received from party grassroots and BN leaders as a reason for his afterthought. The turmoil worsened when Lim led dissident Team B in a crusade against Ling and his Team A in the run up to the 2002 party polls. Worse still, MCA's acquisition of two Chinese dailies, *Nan Yang Siang Pau* and *China*

Press, through its investment arm Huaren Holdings in June 2001 was met with criticisms from Team B leaders. They accused Ling, among others, of attempting to prevent Lim and his teammates from getting coverage in the two newspapers leading to the party polls.

Apprehensive of the impending crisis and the possibility of an unavoidable and permanent split within the largest Chinese-based political party that successfully delivered much needed Chinese vote to the ruling BN in 1999, a peace plan was brokered by Mahathir. The plan envisaged that the status quo was to be observed and that the incumbent president and deputy president would not be challenged in the party polls. Other senior positions would also be uncontested. In mid-2003, a second peace plan aimed at ending the crisis once and for all was agreed upon by the rival factions. The move witnessed the resignation of Ling and Lim as MCA president and deputy president respectively. Vice president Ong Ka Ting (Team A) resumed the president post while Chan Kong Choy (Team B) was made deputy president. In a minor cabinet reshuffle that followed, Chan was made a full minister. With the rift between the two factions being resolved, MCA was in a better position to once again deliver Chinese votes to the BN in the run-up to the 2004 general elections.

Apart from leadership crisis in *Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak* (Sarawak Native People's Party [PBDS]), a minor BN component party in Sarawak, other political parties in the ruling coalition had been spared of divisive leadership crisis in the run-up to the general elections. The BN's strength was earlier boosted by *Parti Bersatu Sabah's* (United Sabah Party [PBS]) re-entry into the ruling coalition in January 2002. The party's reentry was much anticipated following the defection of nine of its 17 state assemblymen to BN component parties between June 1999 and December 2001. With PBS back to its fold, BN was the sole credible coalition of political parties in Sabah. The ruling coalition's position was further strengthened when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi succeeded Mahathir as Malaysia's fifth prime minister in October 31, 2003. The new prime minister pledged to weed out corruption in public and private sectors, improve public delivery system and enhance rural Malays' economic empowerment through new emphasis on agriculture, while at the same time pursuing Mahathir's vision of transforming Malaysia into a fully developed nation by 2020. The government set out a National Integrity Plan (NIP), which aims at reducing corruption and improving the government's delivery system. The National Integrity Institute was also established to oversee the

implementation of the plan. To further spruce up government's image in its fight against corruption, several key figures widely linked to corrupt practices during the Mahathir years were charged in court. They included former government-owned steel mill Perwaja chief Eric Chia and Land and Cooperative Minister Kasitah Gadam. Prior to the general elections, there have also been merger talks between MCA and Gerakan, a move seen as an attempt at wooing the solid Chinese community's support for the BN.

The BA, on the other hand, was grappling with one crisis after another that weakened its position vis-à-vis the BN. In September 2001, the DAP severed its ties with PAS and left the BA for failure to solve long standing disputes over the latter's Islamic state agenda. The DAP has been consistent in pushing for maintenance of a secular state while PAS was adamant on the creation of a theocratic state, albeit, through democratic processes. With the DAP outside the BA, it became increasingly difficult for the opposition front to tap multiracial support vital to its electoral success. Keadilan's merger with PRM also took its toll on the party. A faction opposed to the merger, apparently led by ex-*Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia [ABIM]) leaders, deserted the party after their attempt to halt the process failed. On the verge of the general elections, a group of Keadilan stalwarts defected to UMNO accusing certain quarters in the party of misappropriation of party funds. The stalwarts who defected included Information Chief Ruslan Kassim, Vice Youth Chief Zahid Mat Arip and Youth Executive Secretary Lokman Noor Adam. The continued imprisonment of Anwar Ibrahim for sodomy charges also deprived the opposition of effective leadership. Worse still, three key Keadilan leaders, including its Youth Chief Mohamad Ezam Mohd Noor and Vice-President Azmin Mohamad Ali, were also denied the right to contest in the general elections due to their prior conviction of criminal charges. Malaysian law provides that a person is barred from running for political post if he is convicted of an offence which carries a jail sentence of not less than a year or a fine of not less than RM 2,000. Ezam was appealing against his conviction under the Official Secrets Act for revealing information pertaining to corrupt practices of several BN leaders. He was sentenced to two-year imprisonment. Azmin was also appealing his 18-month jail term for perjury, an offence he supposedly committed during one of Anwar's trials.

Given the crisis within and among opposition political parties, government repressions directed at their leaders, consolidation of BN's

main component parties, and the new government's anti-corruption stance, the BN appeared to be in a better shape than the opposition in the run-up to the 2004 general elections. But these do not fully account for BN's advantageous position vis-à-vis the opposition. In March 2002, the election law has been extensively amended to tilt the balance in favor of the BN. The new amendments made the election court's decision on election petitions appealable. This was understandable following an unexpected decision by Kota Kinabalu Election Court judge, Justice Muhammad Kamil Awang, who in June 2001 nullified the 1999 Sabah state election result for Likas constituency won by a BN candidate. Other amendments included the increase in election deposit for a parliamentary seat from RM5,000 to RM10,000 and a state seat from RM 3,000 to RM 5,000; finality of gazetted electoral roll which cannot be challenged in court; ban on *pondok panas* (canvassing booth) normally set up by political parties outside the polling stations; and extension of the permissible distance from 15 meters to 45 meters within which the supporters are allowed to approach the nomination and polling centers. In law, the amendments ought to apply to both the BN and the opposition. In practice, however, as one commentator notes, the Election Commission had abrogated the rule disallowing canvassing booths after it was evident that the BN had already set up such booths (Khoo 2004).

Added to the ruling coalition's upper hand position was the re-delineation of electoral boundaries finalized in April 2003, which culminated in the creation of 25 new parliamentary seats. The biggest chunk of the new seats went to BN's stronghold states of Johor with six seats; Selangor and Sabah with five seats each; Pahang with three seats; Penang, two seats; and Perak, Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan and Malaca, one seat each. The opposition's bastion states of Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu received none of the new seats. Of the 20 new seats in peninsular Malaysia, only four seats were large Malay-majority. Eight seats were medium Malay-majority, five ethnically mixed, two medium Chinese-majority and one large Chinese-majority. In Sabah, three new seats were Muslim *bumiputera*-majority, one non-Muslim *bumiputera*-majority and one large Chinese-majority. Though the re-delineation exercise seemed to amplify the Malay/ *bumiputera* political power, more seats were allocated to medium Malay-majority and mixed constituencies, in which the non-Malay votes were significant. This is not only an apparent attempt at avoiding the brunt of Malay cultural revolt against the BN, which is often more profound in the

large Malay-majority constituencies, but also a reflection of the ruling coalition's delicate balancing job in maintaining Malay political dominance amidst growing importance of non-Malay votes. The main issues capitalized by the BN in the lead-up to the election aptly capture such a tension.

THE CAMPAIGN

On March 5, 2004, the Parliament was dissolved followed by the dissolution of all state assemblies except in Sarawak. Nomination day was fixed on March 13 and polling day on March 21, allowing a seven-day campaign, the shortest in Malaysia's electoral history. At stake were 219 parliamentary and 505 state seats. There were about 10.28 million registered voters, 800,000 of whom were new voters. Political *ceramahs* (political speeches addressed to a small group of audience) were allowed, provided the organizer applied for police permit at least one week earlier. There were also some other additional rules. Election Commission (EC) Chairman Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman warned that during the campaign period, any candidate who uses "Heaven" as bait for votes would have his *ceramah* stopped by designated enforcement teams (*New Straits Times*, March 10, 2004). It has been a common practice among the more conservative PAS campaigners to secure Muslim votes by informing the Muslim voters that supporting the Islamic party is a religious duty and that they will enter Heaven for such a good deed. The ruling was certainly directed at PAS campaigners, who in the past, as BN leaders claimed, had been promising "Heaven" for those who supported their struggle for the setting up of an Islamic state. The EC chief also stated that *ceramahs* would also be tapped to help enforcement teams monitor the conduct of the candidates.

With a brief campaign period and strict laws governing *ceramahs*, the BN had an entrenched advantage over the opposition. The government-controlled media had been always ready to serve the BN's campaign needs. Though the media had seized every opportune moment to chastise the opposition leaders, it somehow adopted "clean, soft and kind" theme of advertising blitz. Tuned to the BN's manifesto, "Towards a Malaysia of Excellence, Glory and Distinction," the focus of such advertisements had been power-sharing among ethnic groups, religious harmony, national unity, war against graft, continued pursuit of growth-oriented economic policies, and BN's impressive track record in developing the country since independence (*New Straits Times*, March 11, 2004). Though wary of non-Muslim voters'

sensitivity, the mainstream media projected Abdullah as an Islamically pious, humble, approachable and rustic person suited to his “Mr. Nice Guy” image. His *ulama’* (Islamic scholar) grandfather, a bachelor’s degree in Islamic Studies and photos of him leading prayers were added to his Islamic credentials. In an attempt to affirm the premier’s pleasant personality, the media widely reported the opposition leader Abdul Hadi Awang’s personal attack on Abdullah, discrediting his Islamic credentials and accusing him of “merely playing to the gallery” (*New Straits Times*, March 8, 2004). Instead of being drawn into tit-for-tat personal attack, Abdullah sent a message to BN campaigners not to engage in such attempts, hence affirming not only his pleasant personality, but also his soft approach to politics. While rejecting PAS’ theocratic Islamic state blueprint and affirming his commitment to a secular multiracial one, Abdullah pronounced his vision of *Islam Hadhari* (Civilizational Islam), a progressive Islam suited to modern times. With this and the government’s crusade against graft, and efforts toward improving public delivery system were making progress, Abdullah had hijacked almost all important issues that fueled the opposition’s campaign in the 1999 general elections. Further, both his Islamic credentials and soft image stood in stark contradiction not only to the tight-fisted and anti-*ulama’* image, as critics alleged, of his predecessor Mahathir, but also to the seemingly aggressive and uncompromising stance of Hadi. This had been cleverly constructed by the media men to impress upon the voters that they had their hopes for the future in the person of the new Prime Minister. This Pak Lah—as he is dearly addressed by supporters and foes—factor figured prominently in the BN’s election campaign.

The opposition, on the other hand, was robbed of the “Anwar factor,” which in the 1999 general elections had made possible massive advances of the BA, PAS in particular, in northern and eastern Malay heartland states of Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, as well as inroads into the hitherto BN strongholds in the central states of Perak, Selangor and Pahang. With Anwar behind bars, almost total blackout of him in the mainstream media and the BN leaders’ insistence that Anwar was a gone issue, the opposition, especially Keadilan, had to yet again rely on Anwar’s blackeye posters to remind the voters of injustices the BN government meted out to the former Deputy Prime Minister, hence the need for regime change. Given that reform efforts initiated by the BN government were already progressing, the BA’s “Towards a Just, Peaceful and Prosperous New Malaysia” manifesto appeared redundant.

Added to the opposition's already demanding task to undo BN's portrayal of its crusade against graft and BN's new image as the guardian of a moderate progressive Islam were further divisions among the opposition political parties. Keadilan and DAP could not reach consensus on whose candidates should contest in a number of parliamentary and state constituencies. These included Ipoh Timur and Bukit Gelugor parliamentary seats in which two DAP heavyweights, Chairman Lim Kit Siang and Deputy Chairman Karpal Singh, planned to contest. Commenting on the squabble, Hadi characterized the two as "leaders who have outlived their term, like expired medicine," prompting reproaches from the DAP leaders (*Bernama*, March 12, 2004). Though the issue was later resolved when Keadilan aborted its earlier plan to field candidates for the two seats, the dent in the opposition's electoral cooperation has become more apparent leading to the polling day on March 21, 2004.

THE ELECTION AND ITS RESULTS

As Malaysians went out on the polling day to cast their ballots, some found out their names were not on the electoral roll despite having voted in their constituencies in the past. Others had their names on the roll but still could not vote as Election Commission officials failed to assign them to voting streams to obtain ballot papers. Others were transferred without their knowledge to other constituencies and even to other states (Ramdas 2004). These were instances of discrepancies in the conduct of often free, but seldom fair, elections in Malaysia. The opposition leaders alleged that the Election Commission rigged the electoral roll so as to tilt the balance of the electoral game in favor of the ruling BN. They also complained that there were three versions of electoral roll issued by the Election Commission and the version used on the polling day was different from the one given to the candidates one day after the nomination. Unexpectedly high voter turnout in a number of constituencies in PAS-led Terengganu also raised suspicion that phantom voters were brought into the state by BN workers in order to defeat PAS candidates (Ramdas 2004). All this not only called into the question the Election Commission's integrity and independence, but also raised suspicion that the ruling BN had resorted to dirty tactics in order to maintain itself in power.

When final results of the election were announced, the BN won spectacularly. It captured 198 of 219 parliamentary seats, 12 of which were won uncontested. The BN now has 199 seats in the Parliament

after an election court in June 2004 declared a BN candidate the winner for Pasir Puteh parliamentary seat in Kelantan. The seat was previously won by PAS. Its share of popular votes increased from 56.3 percent in 1999 to 64.4 percent, indicating a significant switch of support away from the opposition. At state level, the BN won 453 of 505 seats, upped by 172 seats from 1999. The ruling coalition formed government in all states except in Kelantan where it was narrowly defeated by PAS. It wrested control of Terengganu from PAS by winning 28 of 32 state seats, while sweeping all eight parliamentary seats in the state. In Kedah, the ruling coalition improved its performance significantly by winning all parliamentary seats except one, which it lost to PAS. It also won 31 of 36 seats in the state's legislature. In Kelantan, BN's massive advances almost swept the coalition to power. It won 21 state seats against PAS's 23, thus allowing the opposition Islamic party to continue ruling the state with a wafer-thin majority of two seats in the state assembly. Of 14 parliamentary seats in the state, BN won eight while PAS six. Sabah and Sarawak remained BN's strongholds. PAS's return to the fold of BN rendered the election in Sabah less contentious. In Sabah, the BN won 24 of 25 and 59 of 60 parliamentary and state seats respectively. Seven of the parliamentary seats and four of the state seats were won uncontested. Similarly, BN's spectacular victory was also evident in Sarawak where it won 27 of 28 parliamentary seats, losing only one seat to DAP. Of the 27 seats, six were won uncontested. Among the BN political parties, UMNO emerged victorious. Of 198 parliamentary seats won by the BN, 109 seats were UMNO's. The anchor Malay party also won 302 of 337 contested state seats. With 55.1 percent of parliamentary seats won by the BN in its hand, UMNO restored its position as a dominant partner in the ruling coalition. Both its Chinese partners, the MCA and Gerakan, also did pretty well by winning 31 of 40 and 10 of 12 contested parliamentary seats respectively. Both parties won 76 and 30 state seats respectively. MIC, the Indian partner in the BN, won all nine parliamentary and 19 state seats it contested.

On the contrary, opposition political parties suffered a major setback except the DAP. PAS's representation in the Parliament dropped from 27 to only seven members with almost all party heavyweights losing in the election. Its president, Hadi, lost in the contest for Marang parliamentary seat in the state of Terengganu. He, however, retained the Ru Rendang state seat which he won in 1999, albeit with a reduced majority. PAS's holding of state seats also decreased from 98 in 1999 to only 36. Keadilan suffered a similar

Table 1. Number of parliamentary and state seats won by political parties in 1999 and 2004 general elections

Coalition	Political parties	Number of seats			
		Parliamentary		State	
		1999	2004	1999	2004
<i>Barisan Nasional</i> (National Front [BN])	United Malays National Organization (UMNO)	71	109	176	302
	Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)	29	31	69	76
	<i>Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia</i> (Malaysian People's Movement [Gerakan])	6	10	21	30
	Malayan Indian Congress (MIC)	7	9	15	19
	People's Progressive Party (PPP)	-	1	-	-
	Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	1	-	-	3
	<i>Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu</i> (United Traditional Bumiputera Party [PBB])	10	11	-	0
	<i>Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak</i> (Sarawak Native People's Party [PBDS])	6	6	-	0
	<i>Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah</i> (United Sabah People's Party [PBRBS])	-	1	-	1
	<i>Parti Bersatu Sabah</i> (United Sabah Party [PBS])	-	4	-	13
	Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP)	2	2	-	4
	Sarawak National Action Party (SNAP)	4	-	-	-
	Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP)	-	4	-	0
	Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP)	8	6	-	0
United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organization (UPKO)	3	4	-	5	
Direct	1	-	-	-	
	Sub-total	148	198	281	453
<i>Barisan Alternatif</i> (Alternative Front [BA])	<i>Parti Islam SeMalaysia</i> (Islamic Party of Malaysia [PAS])	27	7	98	36
	<i>Parti Keadilan Rakyat</i> (People's Justice Party [Keadilan])	5	1	4	0
	Democratic Action Party (DAP)	10	12	11	15
	<i>Parti Bersatu Sabah</i> (PBS)	3	-	0	1
	Independent	-	1	-	-
	Sub-total	45	21	113	52
	Total Number of Seats	193	219	394	505

Source: The Star Online 2004.

setback. Its parliamentary seats dropped from five in 1999 to only one. Keadilan's President, Wan Azizah, was the sole candidate from the party who won in the election. She retained the Permatang Pauh parliamentary seat with a thin majority of 590 votes after a recount. Absent in this election was the "Anwar factor" that helped boost the fledgling party's performance in the 1999 general elections. The DAP, however, improved its performance slightly by winning 12 parliamentary seats, upped by 2 seats from 1999. At the state level, the party added four more seats to its holding by winning 15 seats compared to the 11 seats it won in 1999 (see Table 1).

THE CONTEST FOR MALAY VOTES

The BN's spectacular victory indicates that the ruling coalition has regained much of the popularity it lost since the eruption of street demonstrations demanding for political reform following the sacking and arrest of Anwar in September 1998. Of particular interest is UMNO's increased popularity among the Malay voters, whose cultural revolt had taken its toll on the party in the 1999 general election. Special attention to the election results in Malay-majority constituencies is therefore pertinent.

In large Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies, UMNO's share of popular votes increased from 49.7 percent in 1999 to 60.6 percent, nearing its highest score of 62 percent in 1995. The number of parliamentary seats it won in these constituencies also increased from 27 of 59 seats in 1999 to 63 of 71 seats. Of the 63 parliamentary seats it won, two won uncontested. The increase in the average percentage of majority from 18 to 26.2 percent also indicates that the contest was more intense in 1999 than in 2004 (see Table 2).

A similar increase in popular votes and number of parliamentary seats was also evident in medium Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies. UMNO polled 72.4 percent of the popular votes in these constituencies, upped by 10.5 percent from 1999. It also won all 41 parliamentary seats contested in these constituencies, up to two seats more than in 1999. Up to this point, one can say that UMNO's good showing in medium Malay-majority constituencies indicates that the party was more capable of mobilizing multiracial support than the multiracial junior partner in the opposition, Keadilan. The results also seem to signal that the *reformasi* wave and the "Anwar factor" so integral to the sudden surge of Malay support for the opposition in the 1999 general elections had been hardly sustainable. One may observe

Table 2. Electoral performance of *Barisan Nasional* (BN) and the Opposition (OPP) in Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies in peninsular Malaysia, 1990-2004

Parliamentary Constituencies	1990		1995		1999		2004	
	BN	OPP	BN	OPP	BN	OPP	BN	OPP
Large Malay-majority*								
Seats won	38	15	47	13	27	32	63	8
(%)	(71.7)	(28.35)	(78.3)	(21.7)	(45.8)	(54.2)	(88.7)	(11.3)
Percentage of all seats	28.8	11.4	32.6	9.0	18.8	22.2	38.2	4.8
Popular votes	925,682	726,048	1,134,909	686,187	979,362	995,696	1,495,884	973,695
(%)	(56)	(44)	(62)	(38)	(49.7)	(50.3)	(60.6)	(39.4)
Percentage of overall popular votes	19.4	15.2	21.6	13.1%	16.8	12.1	24.6	16
Average majority	9,222		9,966		6,304		8,240	
Average percentage of majority	30		34		18		26.2	
Medium Malay-majority**								
Seats won	38	0	40	0	39	0	41	0
(%)	(100)	(0)	(100)	(0)	(100)	(0)	(100)	(0)
Percentage of all seats	28.8	0	27.8	0	27.1	0	24.8	0
Popular votes	903,587	480,973	1,137,823	442,930	1,017,311	625,416	1,083,307	414,026
(%)	(65)	(35)	(76.9)	(23.1)	(61.9)	(38.1)	(72.4)	(27.6)
Percentage of overall popular votes	19	10.1	21.7	8.4	19	10.7	17.8	6.8
Average majority	9,868		20,533		10,543		16,025	
Average percentage of majority	26		55		26		44	

Sources: Election Commission 1990, 61-78; *New Straits Times*, 27 April 1995; *The Star Online* 2004; *Berita Harian*, March 23, 2004.

*Malay voters > 66 percent of the electorates.

**Malay voters between 50-65 percent of the electorates.

that divisive tensions within the Malay community may have come to an end, and electoral politics in Malay-majority constituencies would be less contentious in the future.

A deeper analysis of electoral results in four regions of large Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies, however, may demonstrate that the above observation fails to capture the nuances of electoral politics in these constituencies. Electoral contests in the northern and eastern region of Peninsular Malaysia, which comprise the Malay heartland states of Perlis, Kedah, Penang (Seberang Perai), Kelantan and Terengganu, remained contentious. There were 40 large Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies in these two regions, 31 of which with more than 80 percent Malay voters. The average percentage of majority was 20.4 percent in the northern region and 12.4 percent in the eastern region, well below the overall level of 26.2 percent. The difference in percentage of popular votes polled by the BN and the opposition in these two regions was also smaller than the overall difference of 21.2 percent. It was 18.2 percent in the north and 6.5 percent in the east (see Table 3).

The BN, however, made comfortable gains in large Malay-majority constituencies located in the central and southern regions of peninsular Malaysia, which include urban and semi-urban constituencies in the states of Perak, Pahang, Selangor, Federal Territory of Putrajaya, Negeri Sembilan, Malacca and Johore. UMNO scored higher than the overall level in these two regions in both percentage of popular votes and average percentage of majority. In the central region, UMNO polled 67.6 percent of the popular votes with an average majority of 35.2 percent. In the southern region, UMNO's electoral success was more evident where it polled 80.4 percent of popular votes with an average majority of 62.1 percent. UMNO's very good performance in these two regions came as no surprise as they hold reputations as the party's strong bastion of power. Even when UMNO faced the most historic challenge in 1999, the party still polled 55.7 percent and 77.1 percent of the popular votes in the central and southern regions respectively, above its 49.6 percent share of overall popular votes in large Malay majority parliamentary constituencies. Interpreting Malay votes in these two regions, however, needs special caution since non-Malay voters also did have significant bearing on the electoral results. Of the 31 large Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies in these two regions, only nine were overwhelmingly Malay majority with more than 80 percent Malay voters. Ten constituencies even had less than 70 percent Malay voters, thus indicating considerable influence of non-Malay voters.

Table 3. Electoral performance of BN and the OPP in four regions of large Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies, 1999 and 2004 general elections

Large Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies	1999		2004	
	BN	OPP	BN	OPP
Northern region (Perlis, Kedah and Penang)				
Seats won	7	9	15	2
(%)	(43.8)	(56.3)	(88.2)	(11.8)
Percentage of all seats	11.9	15.3	21.1	2.8
Popular votes	275,332	253,213	394,884	273,029
(%)	(52.1)	(47.9)	(59.1)	(40.9)
Percentage of overall popular votes	13.9	12.8	16.0	11.1
Average majority	3,899		7,143	
Average percentage of majority	13.0		20.4	
Eastern region (Kelantan and Terengganu)				
Seats won	1	21	17	6
(%)	(4.5)	(95.5)	(73.9)	(26.1)
Percentage of all seats	1.7	35.6	23.9	8.5
Popular votes	314,802	474,915	500,963	439,842
(%)	(39.9)	(60.1)	(53.3)	(46.8)
Percentage of overall popular votes	15.9	24.0	20.3	17.8
Average majority	7,506		4,619	
Average percentage of majority	21.0		12.4	
Central region (Perak, Pahang, Selangor, Putrajaya, Negeri Sembilan and Malacca)				
	1999		2004	
	BN	OPP	BN	OPP
Seats won				
(%)	(88.9)	(11.1)	(100.0)	(0.0)
Percentage of all seats	27.1	3.4	33.8	0.0
Popular votes	304,432	242,359	485,956	232,944
(%)	(55.7)	(44.3)	(67.6)	(32.4)
Percentage of overall popular votes	15.4	12.3	19.7	9.4
Average majority	3,827		10,542	
Average percentage of majority	13.0		35.2	
Southern region (Johore)				
Seats won	3	0	7	0
(%)	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)	(0.0)
Percentage of all seats	5.1	0.0	9.9	0.0
Popular votes	84,796	25,209	114,081	27,880
(%)	(77.1)	(22.9)	(80.4)	(19.6)
Percentage of overall popular votes	4.3	1.3	4.6	1.1
Average majority	19,862		17,240	
Average percentage of majority	52.0		62.1	
Total seats won	27	32	63	8
(%)	(45.8)	(54.2)	(88.7)	(11.3)
Overall popular votes*	979,362	995,696	1,495,884	973,695
(%)	(49.6)	(50.4)	(60.6)	(39.4)

Sources: *The Star Online* 2004, *Berita Harian*, March 23, 2004.

*Overall popular votes in large Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies.

THE CONTEST FOR CHINESE VOTES

There have been mixed results in the contest for Chinese votes. In large Chinese-majority parliamentary constituencies, DAP, the sole opposition political party contested in these constituencies, polled

Table 4. Election results in nine large Chinese-majority parliamentary constituencies and 27 state constituencies located within those parliamentary constituencies in the 2004 general elections

Party/Coalition	Seats won	Percentage of popular votes	Seats won	Percentage of popular votes
BN	3	49.7	21	56.1
DAP	6	50.3	6	42.9
Total	9	100.0	27	100.0

Source: *Berita Harian*, March 23, 2004.

slightly higher than in 1999 (see Table 4). It increased its share of popular votes from 51.2 percent to 52.4 percent, a rise of 1.2 percent. The party also won 10 of 13 parliamentary seats in these constituencies. Further, two DAP senior leaders—Chairman Lim Kit Siang and his deputy, Karpal Singh—who were defeated in the 1999 general election, won in the parliamentary election. Overall, the DAP fared very well in parliamentary constituencies where Chinese voters constitute more than 80 percent of the electorates. The party won all five seats in these constituencies and garnered 58.7 percent of the popular votes (see Table 5). DAP's better showing in the large Chinese majority constituencies could be partly attributed to the party's break up with PAS, whose Islamic state agenda had previously drawn Chinese voters away from the opposition. With the DAP now outside PAS's shadow, BN's demonizing of the former for its ties with the latter did not work. That factor aside, it was in these constituencies that the party had better network of supporters and election machineries.

DAP's better performance in the parliamentary elections in large Chinese-majority constituencies, however, was offset by its defeat in the state elections (see Table 4). Of 27 state constituencies located within nine large Chinese-majority parliamentary constituencies, DAP won only six while BN prevailed with 21. DAP garnered only 42.9 percent of popular votes in the state elections compared to BN's 56.1 percent, more than a reversal of its performance in the parliamentary elections. The party also did not perform well in medium Chinese majority parliamentary constituencies where its share of popular votes plunged from 40.2 percent in 1999 to 36.3 percent. It won only one of 13 parliamentary seats in these constituencies. The election results in medium and large Chinese-majority parliamentary constituencies combined show that the BN narrowly outdid the DAP in the number of seats won as well as in the share of popular votes. The BN won 15 of 26 parliamentary seats and garnered 55.5 percent of the popular votes (see Table 5).

Table 5. Electoral performance of BN and Democratic Action Party (DAP) in Chinese-majority parliamentary constituencies in peninsular Malaysia, 1990-2004

Parliamentary constituencies	1990		1995		1999		2004	
	BN	OPP	BN	OPP	BN	OPP	BN	OPP
Large Chinese-majority*								
Seats won	0	11	6	6	5	7	3	10
(%)	(0.0)	(100.0)	(50.0)	(50.0)	(41.7)	(58.3)	(23.1)	(76.9)
Percentage of all seats	0.0	8.3	4.2	4.2	4.9	6.9	1.8	6.1
Popular votes	167,139	312,499	260,953	260,953	276,446	290,357	274,934	302,950
(%)	(35.0)	(65.0)	(52.0)	(52.0)	(48.8)	(51.2)	(47.6)	(52.4)
Percentage of overall popular votes	3.5	6.6	5.0	5.0	4.7	5.0	4.5	5.0
Average majority	13,215		5,804		5,286		7,172	
Average percentage of majority	29.0		13.0		10.7		16.0	
Medium Chinese-majority**								
Seats won	7	6	11	2	11	2	12.0	1
(%)	(53.8)	(46.2)	(85.0)	(15.0)	(83.3)	(16.7)	(92.3)	(7.7)
Percentage of all seats	5.3	4.5	7.6	1.4	6.9	1.4	7.3	0.6
Popular votes	294,910	314,815	345,873	222,772	330,584	299,057	352,926	201,072
(%)	(48.8)	(51.6)	(61.0)	(39.0)	(56.1)	(43.9)	(63.7)	(36.3)
Percentage of overall popular votes	6.2	6.6	6.6	4.2	5.7	5.1	5.8	3.3
Average majority	6,060		9,917		8,117		11,773	
Average percentage of majority	12.8		25.0		17.0		29.0	
Total seats	7	17	17	8	15	9	15	11
(%)	(29.2)	(70.8)	(68.0)	(32.0)	(62.5)	(37.5)	(57.7)	(42.3)
Total votes	462,049	627,314	585,690	49,916	607,030	589,414	627,860	504,022
(%)	(42.4)	(57.6)	(54.0)	(46.0)	(50.7)	(49.3)	(55.5)	(44.5)

Sources: Election Commission 1990, 61-78; *New Straits Times*, 27 April 1995, *The Star Online* 2004, *Berita Harian*, March 23, 2004.

* Chinese voters > 66 percent of the electorates.

** Chinese voters between 50-65 percent of the electorates.

Table 6. 2004 general elections results in five overwhelming Chinese-majority parliamentary constituencies*

Constituencies	<i>Barisan Nasional</i> (BN)	Democratic Action Party (DAP)	Winner
Kepong	21,428	23,282	DAP
Seputeh	17,418	28,921	DAP
Tanjong	17,424	21,682	DAP
Ipoh Timur	19,077	28,851	DAP
Cheras	15,970	26,940	DAP
Total	91,317	129,646	
(%)	(41.3)	(58.7)	

Source: *Berita Harian*, March 23, 2004.

*More than 80 percent of the registered voters are Chinese.

Appraising general elections results over the past four general elections, however, reveals a general trend of declining support for the DAP in Chinese-majority constituencies beginning from the early 1990s (see Table 6). Its share of popular votes in these constituencies dropped from 57.6 percent in 1990 to 46 percent in 1995, climbed slightly to 49.3 percent in 1999 and dropped again to 44.5 percent in 2004. Small difference in the percentage of popular votes, between 15.2 percent and 1.4 percent in the four general elections, however, suggests that the contest for votes in these constituencies remained fierce. It also suggests that the Chinese voters, as far as the parliamentary elections are concerned, are still divided right down the middle. Given that scenario, the BN's electoral success in these constituencies was to a large extent attributable to its ability to mobilize multiracial support that the opposition often failed to gain. Its better showing in medium Chinese majority constituencies than the large ones seems to reinforce this assumption. The Chinese-based BN political parties also seem to rely on non-Chinese support as much as their Malay counterpart demands from the non-Malays in securing electoral victory. Ironically, most political parties are still structured along racial fragmentation though the election results aptly indicate the growing significance of politics beyond ethnicity in Malaysia.

THE CONTESTS IN MIXED CONSTITUENCIES

Mixed constituencies remained safe fortresses for the BN. It won all 27 parliamentary seats in these constituencies and garnered 67.7 percent of the popular votes (see Table 7). The BN's impressive performance in these constituencies came as no surprise. Since the 1990 general elections, the BN won all parliamentary seats in these constituencies,

Parliamentary constituencies	1990		1995		1999		2004	
	BN	OPP	BN	OPP	BN	OPP	BN	OPP
Mixed*								
Seats won	17	0	19	0	21	1	27	0
(%)	100.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	95.2	4.8	100.0	0.0
Percentage of all seats	12.9	0.0	13.2	0.0	14.6	0.7	16.4	0.0
Popular votes	373,607	268,089	584,265	186,811	553,980	370,664	663,979	321,589
(%)	57.3	42.7	74.0	26.0	59.9	40.1	67.7	32.3
Percentage of overall popular votes	7.8	5.6	11.1	3.6	9.5	6.4	10.9	5.3
Average majority	6,156		19,389		9,215		14,515	
Average percentage of majority	17.0		50.0		22.0		39.0	

Sources: Election Commission 1990, 61-78; *New Straits Times*, 27 April 1995; *The Star Online* 2004, *Berita Harian*, March 23, 2004.

*No single ethnic group forms the majority.

except one seat it lost to the DAP in 1999. Its share of popular votes surged from 57.3 percent in 1990 to 74 percent in 1995, dropped to 59 percent in 1999, and rose again to 67 percent in 2004. With opposition political parties often divided along racial, religious and ideological differences, their position vis-à-vis the more moderate multiracial BN has been seriously weakened. The BN's relatively dented electoral performance in these constituencies was evident in the 1990 and 1999 general elections when the opposition political parties formed a relatively viable alternative coalition to the ruling BN. Without such alternative coalition, the BN was set to benefit from the opposition's structural deficit. Given the BN's entrenched advantage, it is not surprising that the number of mixed parliamentary constituencies had increased, through delineation of electoral boundaries carried out every eight to ten years, from 17 in 1990 to 27 in 2004. If the opposition continues to be fragmented along racial and ideological differences, and as such fails to mobilize multiracial support, it is not too remote a possibility that the number of these constituencies will multiply in the future.

CONCLUSION

The 2004 general election results indicate that the BN once again managed to gain support from both Malay and non-Malay voters, mirroring its hitherto strength vis-à-vis the opposition, whose attempt to galvanize decisive multiracial support has not been splendidly successful thus far. As contests in medium Malay- and Chinese-majority as well as mixed constituencies have been comfortably advantageous to the BN, these constituencies have emerged as the BN's new bastion of power, a trend that is observable since the early 1990s. As the BN's power base shifted to these new constituencies, it is no longer viable for its ethnic-based component political parties to extensively capitalize on narrow ethnic issues in order to mobilize communal support. Doing just that would certainly rob these political parties of wider cross-ethnic support vital to their electoral success. Thus far, the need to sustain economic development and the delivery of material benefits across racial lines, coupled with the pursuit of progressive Islam suited to the needs of a modern multiracial society, has replaced narrow ethnic struggle as the BN's main card. This cardinal aspect of politics of developmentalism and moderate Islam seems to emerge as the main variable in Malaysian electoral politics. However,

this does not suggest that ethnicity has lost its steam in Malaysian politics. As the contests for votes in traditional Malay heartland states and urban large Chinese-majority constituencies remain highly contentious with neither the BN nor the opposition gaining decisive support in these areas, narrow ethnic struggle is still readily available to be manipulated for electoral gains in these constituencies.

The growing importance of politics beyond ethnicity also poses an imminent challenge to the BN. While it needs to maintain a more moderate stance on contentious religious and ethnic issues amidst growing expectation among non-Malay communities of their enhanced political role, the UMNO-led BN also needs to maintain a considerable degree of sensitivity to Islam and the plight of the Malays, lest it will suffer erosion of electoral support in the often hard-fought contests for votes in large Malay-majority constituencies and risks its dominant position in the ruling coalition. Apart from that, it also has to respond to the mounting call for political reform and the widening of public space amidst rising political consciousness among the expanding middle class. This forces the BN, especially its dominant partner UMNO, to perform a delicate balancing job between maintaining Malay political dominance, winning multiracial support and responding to mounting call for democracy and good governance. As the centrifugal forces in the society become more intense, the Malaysian model of a "syncretic state" will have to undergo a severe test.

The challenge is even more ferocious for the opposition political parties. Their imminent task is to deal with long-standing religious, cultural and ideological divide and work toward formation of a more cohesive opposition front. The accomplishment of such a task no doubt requires a common ground to cement efforts at coalition building. The immediate available common ground has been struggles against injustices perpetrated by the powers-that-be, which had, in turn, gradually pushed Malaysian politics away from the discourse of ethnicity to that of democracy and good governance. In a nutshell, the BN's spectacular electoral victory belied continuing tensions in Malaysian politics. This time, as the contests for multiracial votes are increasingly becoming significant to secure electoral victory, and the centrifugal forces pushing for the widening of the public space as well as the delivery of material benefits become more intense, the tensions are less being drawn along narrow ethnic struggle, than among a constellation of contending discourses of democracy, religious identity and economic development.

POSTSCRIPT

At least two major post-electoral developments are worth noting. First, the post-electoral deal brokered and struck by PAS and UMNO in relation to election petitions filed by both parties in Kelantan and Terengganu. The deal entailed withdrawal of all election petitions filed by both parties in the two states. This was done by way of preliminary objections raised by the defendants' counsels in the election court. Though both parties denied that there was any deal to that effect, the election courts struck out nine election petitions each in the two states. The only exception was the petition challenging election results for Pasir Puteh parliamentary constituency in Kelantan. The election court declared that the seat was BN's after finding that the Election Commission had wrongly announced a PAS candidate the winner. The fact that both parties did not appeal against the decisions seemed to affirm speculations that a deal had actually been struck by both parties. PAS-led Kelantan government's spokesman and a senior state executive councilor, Husam Musa, admitted that he had met Prime Minister Abdullah's son-in-law and a former senior aide, Khairy Jamaluddin, to discuss the implications of election petitions in both states (*Malaysiakini*, July 12, 2004). The latter also confirmed that the meeting did take place. Both of them, however, denied that a deal had been brokered to withdraw the election petitions. Whether the actual deal did take place or not, the election court's decisions had maintained the status quo in the two east coast states. PAS could be assured of the power to rule the state, albeit with a wafer-thin majority of two seats in the state legislature, while the BN-led federal government had also been spared of detailed public revelation of electoral irregularities in the course of the trial that would eventually erode Abdullah's integrity.

The second post-electoral development that would likely have a profound bearing on Malaysia's future political landscape was the unexpected Federal Court's decision on September 2, 2004 to overturn Anwar's conviction for sodomy charges, which he maintained were trumped up to prevent him from challenging former Prime Minister Mahathir. As he was ushered out of the court as a free man, civil society leaders and western diplomats lauded the court's decision not only as a vindication of Anwar's innocence, but also a sign of restoration of judicial independence under Abdullah's premiership. Anwar himself thanked Abdullah for not interfering with the judges' decision (*The Star*, September 4, 2004). Though Anwar made it clear

that he would discuss future plans with opposition and civil society leaders soon after his return from Germany where he underwent long overdue medical treatment for his acute backpain, he also indicated the possibility of engaging UMNO leaders for the betterment of the people and the country. The local media was quick to project Anwar's release and the absence of feisty and confrontational tone in Anwar's post-prison politics as a national reconciliation in the making (*The Star*, September 4, 2004). On a different note, Anwar also described the court's decision to quash his conviction as a small sign of reform. He called on Abdullah to substantiate his reform initiatives by improving laws and eliminating corrupt practices and all forms of repressions. While reiterating his commitment to reforms, he also pledged to help strengthen the opposition front (*Malaysiakini*, September 4, 2004). In this regard, Anwar's release may provide a new hope for the opposition forces. Anwar, a charismatic leader and an icon of struggle for justice in his own right, may help unite contending opposition political parties along the struggle for justice and political reform. As a former ABIM chief and a state leader known for his commitment to civil society empowerment and moderate Islam, Anwar naturally commands strong following among nongovernment organization (NGO) activists and urban educated middle-class that may help galvanize support for greater political reform. In this regard, Anwar's comeback may pose formidable challenge to the BN. It will have to face a possible renewed struggle for reform and good governance as well as a more cohesive opposition front. This, however, depends very much on the extent to which Anwar and the opposition are able to stretch the limits of democratic practice in Malaysia, as well as the ability of the government to respond to the call for reform. ❀

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