

Malaysia's Elections: The Trust Deficit, the 1MDB-Najib Money-Laundering Scandal and the BN Defeat

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The significance of the fourteenth General Election goes beyond Malaysian shores. 9th May will be remembered as the day when the multi-ethnic population of a country ousted the world's longest ruling coalition through the ballot-box in a peaceful atmosphere without a drop of blood. This is unique in emerging democracies in the Global South. It makes one proud to be a Malaysian.

This victory of the political opposition should be placed within its proper perspective before we try to explain the reasons for it. Also, what are the challenges that the Pakatan Harapan led government now faces and will it be able to handle them?

Since the early years of Independence, Malaysia has had a functioning opposition. There hasn't been a single moment in our history when there was no one on the opposition benches, not in 1964 nor in 1974 nor in 2004, occasions when the ruling coalition in the form of the Barisan Nasional and its predecessor, the Alliance, won overwhelmingly in Parliamentary elections.

Opposition parties forging coalitions to defeat the Alliance or the BN has also been happening for a long time. A partnership of two left parties, the Parti Rakyat and the Labour Party called the Socialist Front for instance did fairly well in the 1959 General Election. 40 years later there was a more earnest attempt to create a four party coalition comprising PAS, DAP, KeAdilan and Parti Rakyat. Named the Barisan Alternatif (BA), the coalition sought to mobilise voters in the 10th General Election in 1999 through allegations of abuse of power and authoritarianism against Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and the BN. The 'black eye' of the incarcerated Anwar Ibrahim was a major rallying point for the BA. The BA, specifically PAS, made some electoral gains notably capturing the state of Terengganu.

However, it was in the 2008 General Election that the opposition really made great strides, denying the BN its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time and capturing four states, namely Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor, apart from retaining control over Kelantan. Anwar was an important campaigner as he was in the 2013 contest in which the opposition Pakatan Rakyat consisting of PAS, the DAP and Keadilan remained in power in Kelantan, Penang and Selangor and continued to deny the BN its two-thirds majority in Parliament. In fact, the opposition increased its parliamentary representation by 7 seats.

The issues that brought the votes to the Pakatan Rakyat in the twelfth and thirteenth General Elections were related to allegations of restrictions to civil and political rights, corruption, socio-economic injustices, ethnic polarization and, in the case of PAS, the inability of the BN to implement Islamic law. In themselves, these issues were not new except that the environment had changed with the alternative media playing a huge role in

shaping public perceptions. They served to erode the support base of the ruling BN.

It is against this backdrop that one should view the defeat of the BN in the recently concluded General Election. Each and every issue that had been part of the opposition's menu in the past now assumed a more concrete manifestation. Thus, the neglect of the bottom 40% of society and the marginalisation of a substantial segment of the middle-class amidst rising cost of living that had become pervasive in the last 5 or 6 years found a villain in the Goods and Services Tax (GST) introduced in April 2015. This was undoubtedly a chink in the armour of the BN which exposed the government's vulnerability. But it would not have had such an adverse impact had it not been for the 1MDB scandal. A mammoth money-laundering scam implicating Najib, his family and his sidekicks, the then Prime Minister sought to conceal and camouflage it through dismissal of political comrades, by squeezing out public officials and by emasculating local inquiries. Not a single person has been charged for any of the wrongdoings connected with 1MDB or its affiliates within Malaysia. It is this utter lack of honesty and integrity on the part of the Najib government that incensed a lot of Malaysians and convinced them that they should oust him. If anything, suspicions about the mismanagement of FELDA reflected in the sale of land and properties and alleged misdeeds in other government linked outfits further undermined his credibility. To put it in a nutshell, over a period of 4 or 5 years, a yawning trust deficit had developed between Najib and the people. The verdict at the polls was a mirror of that deficit.

What exacerbated the trust deficit was the conduct of the election itself. As in 2013, Najib campaigned as if he was in a presidential race where everything is focused upon him. Since there was already a trust deficit, it weakened his position further. The temporary dissolution of Mahathir's party by the Registrar of Societies and the ban on his image in the campaign by the Election Commission intensified the anger among voters. Most of all, it was the viciousness with which Mahathir was savaged in the government linked media that increased their disgust towards the incumbent. There was a total lack of manners, of courtesy which is so integral to Malay culture. This gross, crude violation of 'adab' in Najib's campaign cost him dearly.



Najib had underestimated the strength of the bond between his nemesis and the people. At the helm of the nation for 22 years, there was a high degree of appreciation of Mahathir's contribution to the well-being of the masses, even if many were also aware of the downside of his leadership. As leader of the PakatanHarapan, he demonstrated two dimensions of his leadership which were critical to the success of his coalition. One, he solidified a disparate coalition by endowing the four parties with a sense of common purpose. A common logo was an outstanding achievement. Previous attempts at creating such a unifying symbol among opposition parties had failed. The logo gave Pakatan a shared identity as a result of which the voters' confidence in the coalition heightened. Two, Mahathir also succeeded in convincing the people that their overriding mission was to overthrow a leader who was perceived as corrupt and greedy. It was a simple direct message which he clinched by telling the voters that if they did not fulfil their mission Malaysia was doomed. Hence, Pakatan's battle-cry "to save the nation."

Formulating effective strategies to combat corruption would therefore be the Pakatan's greatest challenge. Its manifesto contains some ideas on this, including making political donations transparent. It also seeks to make the anti- corruption commission truly independent of the Executive by providing the Malaysian parliament with authority over the body. There are many other office-holders and institutions vital for good governance that the Pakatan has identified which will also be subjected to parliamentary oversight. The Council of Elders that Prime Minister Mahathir has established to address matters pertaining to finance and the economy may also have to provide inputs on governance and integrity.

There are of course other equally serious challenges that the new government will have to face. The widening income gap between those who have a lot and those who have a little which has far-reaching consequences for other sectors of society should be the nation's priority. Certain laws which subvert the quest for human dignity should also be reviewed. Creating conditions that are conducive for the growth of empathy and understanding among the communities is of crucial importance.

For Pakatan to implement the onerous tasks ahead, there will have to be internal cohesion. This is especially true of a coalition like PakatanHarapan. It stands to reason that Dr. Mahathir be given a bit of time and space to strengthen the sinews of the coalition as it leads the quest for a better Malaysia.

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