

An Analysis of Malaysia's 12th General Election

1. Introduction

In our pre-election analysis, we estimated that the Opposition parties will win about 50 parliamentary seats and face a very strong challenge from DAP-Keadilan in Penang. We also warned of the strong wind blowing in the Indian and Chinese communities towards the Opposition. We did not and could not then anticipate the equally strong wave of Malay support for the Opposition which resulted in the Opposition gaining 82 seats in Parliament, denying the Barisan Nasional of its two-thirds majority, the first time since the May 1969 General Election. We had in our pre-election analysis noted the possibility of a divided outcome with a strong Malay government against a strong non-Malay Opposition. However, this did not materialize as Malay support for the Opposition was also strong resulting in multi racial Keadilan winning 31 seats and PAS 23 seat in Parliament. In fact, the popular votes obtained by UMNO (35.5%) and combined PAS/Keadilan (34.8%) was almost equal. Whilst the loss of Penang state to the Opposition did not come as a surprise after the first week of campaign with massive turnout at DAP ceramahs and large donations collected on the spot for the DAP candidates, the fall of Perak and Selangor was totally unexpected. What happened? What caused the massive swing?

Some facts on the 12th General Election should be noted and analysed. The Barisan Nasional within Peninsular Malaysia failed to obtain a majority of popular votes cast. It only obtained 49% of the popular votes in Peninsular Malaysia whereas the Opposition had the majority of popular votes – 51%. UMNO won 35% of popular votes against 34.8% won by PAS and Keadilan. Although the Barisan Nasional won 140 seats in Parliament, 54 seats came from Sabah and Sarawak. So, without Sabah and Sarawak, Barisan Nasional will not have even obtained a simple majority in Parliament. If the Federal Territory was to be considered as a state, the Barisan Nasional actually

lost 6 states. In Negeri Sembilan, it survives with only a 4-seat majority. In Pahang, Barisan Nasional even lost the state capital, Kuantan. Even the Barisan Nasional fortress of Johor was successfully penetrated by the Opposition this time with both DAP and PAS winning seats. There are no safe bastions for Barisan Nasional anymore.

Although, the Chinese and Indian votes have decisively swung to the DAP and Keadilan, causing MCA, MIC and Gerakan to lose massive support, it was totally unexpected for UMNO to lose in urban and semi-urban Malay seats like Titiwangsa and Lembah Pantai (in Kuala Lumpur city), Shah Alam, Hulu Langat, Kuala Langat, Kuala Selangor, Gombak, Ampang, Sungei Petani, Merbok, Kulim, Nibong Tebal, Balik Pulau (in Penang), Parit Buntar and Bagan Serai in Perak. Barisan Nasional even lost Kuantan – the capital of Pahang and Indera Mahkota. With increasing urbanization with the urban population projected to increase to 73% in 2020, up from 62% in 2000, can UMNO prevent a slide in urban Malay votes? What made the urban Malays desert UMNO? This question needs to be addressed.

For the MCA and MIC, it was clearly their worst ever electoral performance ever. In 1969, MCA won 13 out of 24 seats contested (54%), whereas this year MCA only won 37.5% of parliament seats contested. Gerakan was totally wiped out in Penang – its stronghold. The DAP campaigned that a vote for MCA or Gerakan is a vote for UMNO to capitalize on the anger of the Chinese community over UMNO. Hence, the track record of MCA and Gerakan was ignored with an emotional swing against UMNO.

2. What the Election Results Mean

Several broad conclusions can be drawn from the 12th General Election:-

- (i) It is a seismic shift in Malaysian politics. A political tsunami as the Star headlines said. The old ways of campaigning may no longer work. Putting fear into voters minds did not work. The use of mainstream media to create spin or to demonise the opposition was detested by urban voters and had a counter-effect instead. From feedback, many urban voters were turned off by the spin especially in NST and Star.
- (ii) The victory of DAP, Keadilan and PAS in many areas showed that voters do not buy the argument that the Chinese won't support PAS and DAP won't get Malay votes. As Dr. Farish Noor reported from the PAS Headquarters in Kota Baru on Saturday night (polling night), Kelantan PAS supporters cheered when the DAP gained control of Penang. So the notion Malays won't support DAP was debunked that night in Kota Baru.
- (iii) Makkal Sakhti (People Power), the cry of HINDRAF, caused a tidal wave of support from the Indian community towards the opposition. This seismic shift of Indian voters contributed to the defeat of many Barisan Nasional candidates, not only MIC candidates.
- (iv) The Barisan Nasional's brand of race-based politics is no longer an attractive proposition to voters. Chinese voters deserted MCA and Gerakan. Indian voters swung away from MIC. Many Malay voters switched to Keadilan, making Keadilan the biggest opposition party with 31 parliament seats. The Opposition parties won, not on race-based issues but across a range of issues that cuts across ethnic lines. The MCA and MIC lost whilst trying to portray themselves as defenders of their race. UMNO lost ground to Keadilan even with Anwar calling for an end to NEP. Is this then, a new paradigm for Malaysian politics that Malaysian voters are more taken in by wider national issues such as corruption, crime, cost of living, social justice and human rights

which cuts across all ethnic groups rather than narrow ethnic issues that favour any particular race? Even MCA championing the cause of Chinese schools didn't get much support from the Chinese community. But, PAS delivered votes to DAP and Chinese voters supported both PAS and Keadilan. Should MCA remain purely a Chinese party when it lost more Chinese votes to the DAP or should it become a multi-racial party and widen its appeal to non-Chinese? This has set the stage for a new era of multi-racial politics in Malaysia, perhaps the beginning of a two-party system which is healthy in any democracy.

- (v) The loss of Penang, Kedah, Selangor and Perak can perhaps be partially attributed to complacency in the Barisan Nasional camp. Over-confidence in a proven track record may be another factor. In Penang, the non-Malay voters were unhappy with Gerakan for being unable or unwilling to stand up to UMNO. However, the Opposition's ability to capture, in particular, Penang and Selangor, the jewels in the crown so to speak, and even Perak to a lesser extent, will enable DAP and Keadilan to attempt to provide a new model of governance, which if they succeed, could further strengthen their grips on these states in the next General Elections and extend their support in other states like Negeri Sembilan (remember earlier point: Barisan Nasional only have 4 seat majority in Negeri Sembilan). However, if the DAP and Keadilan mess up, they will lose their opportunity and the voters in the 3 states Penang, Perak and Selangor may revert to the Barisan Nasional. It is however, unlikely DAP and Keadilan will squander their chance. It is left to be seen if the new State Governments in Penang, Perak and Selangor can deliver. If so, expect them to control these states for at least two terms if the state governments are administered well with good governance, accountability and transparency.

(vi) The point has also to be made that never in the history of Malaysia has the Prime Minister ever lost his own home state. In Penang, UMNO/Barisan Nasional only retained 2 parliamentary seats, that of the Prime Minister and Second Finance Minister Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop. The 12th General Election by any reckoning is UMNO's worst-ever performance, worse than in 1969 and 1999.

3. What Caused the Swing to the Opposition

The political tsunami was brought about by various factors, foremost of which is the perceived arrogance of power. All racial groups – Malays, Chinese and Indians have the perception that the Barisan Nasional did not hear or listen to the voice of the people. The Barisan Nasional mishandled the Bersih and HINDRAF protests. This show no tolerance for public assemblies and no outlet for grievances which resulted in the aggrieved parties voting against the Barisan Nasional in the ballot boxes. The Barisan Nasional's over-confidence and poor intelligence failed to identify growing anger and frustration of the people. The Prime Minister's challenge to Opposition supporters not to demonstrate but to take it to the ballot box also made many fence sitters and opposition sympathizers to vote for the opposition. The Barisan Nasional failed to effectively read the mood on the ground. Many urban voters in particular the fence sitters were put off by the propaganda, spin and one-sided coverage on TV and in NST and Star.

A contributory factor could be internal bickering over the choice of candidates within the Barisan Nasional component parties not only in UMNO but also in MCA and Gerakan. Apart from the above, other factors also contributed to the unprecedented swing in support to the Opposition. These can be attributed as the 9C's:-

- (i) Change : A massive mood swing brought about by the opposition's promise of change and reform.
- (ii) Crime : Growing anger at the seeming inability of the Federal Government to tackle crime effectively.
- (iii) Cost of Living : Rising frustration over increases in the cost of living.
- (iv) Corruption : Growing perception that corruption has worsened over the past four years.
- (v) Courts : Disgust over the Lingham enquiry and concern about judicial independence.
- (vi) Convergence of Issues : All these issues coming to a head at the same time and perception that government is not listening or effectively addressing them. There is really no one single big issue but a convergence of issues that caused people to be dissatisfied and angry with the Barisan Nasional.
- (vii) Communications Technology : The power of the internet and blogs to provide alternative information, that is downloaded, printed and distributed even to kampungs and new villages. With the spin in NST, more people trust the blogs more than the mainstream media.
- (viii) Credible Leadership : For the first time, the Opposition was able to present credible leadership and credible alternatives. The Anwar factor is pivotal. More than the 1998 reformasi campaign this year is much more an Anwar-coordinated campaign. DAP, Keadilan and PAS put up young, credible candidates. Lim Guan Eng, a Monash economics and accounting graduate, taking charge of

Penang instead of his father Lim Kit Siang provided a younger and less belligerent face to the electorate backed by credible candidates like Prof. Ramasamy, Lim Chin Tiong and Jeff Ooi.

- (ix) Campaign Strategy : The Barisan Nasional's campaign strategy was much of the same. The old school approach – some carrots and sticks. It offered development on the one hand, it threatens on the other, warning the Chinese and Indian communities that they will have no representation in government. The Chinese and Indian voters didn't buy this argument this time. At one point in Penang, feedback from many Chinese voters is they don't mind not even having a Chinese Chief Minister to teach the Barisan Nasional a lesson. Promises and fear didn't work this time. UMNO also took Malay voters for granted. On the other hand, the Opposition's strategy was low-key, humble and non-threatening. PAS didn't speak of an Islamic State. DAP didn't campaign to capture Penang as was the case during Tanjung I, II and III. All DAP asked for was to deny Barisan Nasional two-thirds majority both in Penang and in Parliament. This softer approach compared to Kit Siang's aggressive style in 1990, 1995, 1999 won DAP many sympathetic votes. The use of blogs as alternative media was also highly successful.

For the Chinese voters, memories don't fade easily. Often politicians tend to think people have short memories. But the Chinese voters are still upset and aggrieved over the waving of the keris incident at UMNO Youth Assemblies and the racial rhetoric

in the 2006 UMNO General Assembly. Chinese voters also perceived MCA and Gerakan to be too subservient to UMNO. For the Indian voters, HINDRAF was a key factor. The power of Makkal Sakhti (People's Power) is real and translated into votes for the Opposition throughout the country where there are sizeable number of Indian voters. For Malay voters, Anwar provided an alternative leadership. He read the Malay mood well. To the Malay voters in Anwar's campaign speeches, the NEP because of its over-obsession with Bumiputra equity, benefitted only UMNO Puteras and didn't benefit the ordinary people in the rural heartland. UMNO Youth was also perceived to be brash and arrogant.

4. Looking Ahead

What the 12th General Election provided is a timely wake-up call to all political parties. They need to change, reform and deliver.

For the Barisan Nasional, it means reinvention to stay relevant. For the Opposition in control of the 5 State Governments, it means the need to deliver what they promised. Can they work together?

The question, looking ahead, is how UMNO will react. Will it be magnanimous and learn the right lessons? Will it change and reform from within and lower racial rhetoric to win back non-Malay support or will it up the ante to become even more ultra-Malay to retain whatever Malay support it still has? Will UMNO remain united and cohesive or will there be a scramble for positions in its coming General Assembly and party elections? The internal dynamics in UMNO in the lead up to party elections need to be watched.

For the Opposition, the key question is whether the new State Governments in Penang, Perak and Selangor can perform and deliver and meet the expectations of the

people? Will there be a witch-hunt against Barisan Nasional supporters? Will they be able to cooperate and work closely together? Will they gain the support of civil servants? Will they be able to cooperate and work with the Federal Government? What will be the impact on Government-Linked Companies controlled by or connected to these state governments?

For the MCA and MIC, the question is whether they should continue to narrowly fight for Chinese and Indian interests or should they reinvent themselves to become multi-racial parties like DAP and Keadilan and champion wider national issues such as corruption, human rights, judicial independence and economic opportunities.

For the Gerakan and PPP, the key question is whether they should continue to exist and if so, what is their niche in Malaysian politics? Should they bring about the merger of smaller parties in the Barisan Nasional including those in Sabah and Sarawak? Will the 2008 Election lead to the emergence of a two-party system in Malaysia?

For the Prime Minister, this is an opportunity to clean house. To listen more to the voice of the people and not to be disconnected to the feelings on the ground. We have in Pak Lah a decent man, a dedicated and pious Muslim. He should use his strength to reinvent himself and renew UMNO and Barisan Nasional. Credit ought to be also given to the Prime Minister for providing more democratic space and a fairer, freer election as well as for his stoic acceptance of the democratic voice of the people, and for not reacting ala the midnite snatch in Sabah in the mid-1980's or having an Operasi Lallang or May 13/NOC type reaction.

There is clearly a need to review certain National Policies that causes unhappiness and decisiveness. Will the Barisan Nasional leadership, be able, perhaps more willing to rise to the occasion to bite the bullet?

In the final analysis, despite the massive swing to the opposition, the Barisan Nasional still remained in office at Federal level and has a comfortable majority to provide continuity and political stability.

This analysis provides some key facts and pose some key questions that need to be pondered over in the days and months ahead. Whatever it is, Malaysian politics post March 8, 2008 will not be the same again. It is time for a new beginning. A new era has begun. More importantly, to note that the morning after, most surveys showed that many Malaysians from all races and different walks of life felt good over the election outcome.

Dated: 13th March 2008