

Political Outlook: What Now?

Session Five was chaired by **Mr Steven C M Wong**, Senior Director, ISIS Malaysia. The speakers were **YB Dato' Saifuddin Abdullah**, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Higher Education, **Datuk Dr Dennison Jayasooria**, Principal Research Fellow, Institute of Ethnic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and **Associate Prof Dr Andrew Aeria**, Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. ISIS Researcher **Mazlena Mazlan** reports.



From left: Steven C M Wong, Denison Jayasooria, Saifuddin Abdullah and Andrew Aeria

YB Dato Saifuddin Abdullah opened the session by talking about 'new politics,' a concept that emerged in Malaysia after the 1999 general elections but which became subdued after Barisan Nasional's big victory in 2004. Discussions about new politics are re-emerging in the run-up to the next general elections. Saifuddin's idea of new politics, however, does not involve a regime change, but (i) is free from any ideologies; (ii) has no specific definition; and (iii) is a healthier political culture.

Saifuddin promoted the idea of integrity in politics. This implies joining politics out of a sense of idealism and principle. Money politics should no longer be practiced. In this regard, he

commends the Prime Minister who pushed for the amendment of UMNO's constitution upon succeeding the party's presidency. Voting rights were expanded from a small number of delegates at the general assembly to the thousands of party members, making vote-buying harder.

Saifuddin also supported efforts to create a new governance framework that recognizes the importance of other stakeholders, namely the business community and civil societies in policymaking, and that draws them into the consultation process. Such processes may require a formal structure, and are held at all levels from the federal to the local level.

Nonetheless, he recognized that the country's third tier governance structure remains weak. Decision-making remains a top-down process, and regular meetings at district and local levels are merely routines amidst weak community development.

Democracy in Malaysia has evolved from representative-based to more participatory and deliberative. Most young people are cynical and sceptical towards politics, but the belief in democracy remains intact. As such, the decision-making process needs reform. Innovations are needed in our approach to democracy. Nonetheless, little improvement has been made in widening the 'invited space' for civil societies to participate in democracy. For this reason, initiatives to engage stakeholders are an important step forward.

Saifuddin painted an optimistic picture for the next elections. Regardless of the victor, we can expect good checks and balances. Without Barisan Nasional winning a two-thirds majority, the transformational agenda will continue to advance. In addition, new politics will have a better chance as both sides find ways to engage each other in a more civilized manner.

Datuk Dr Denison Jayasooria found that tremendous grievances remain on the ground over unresolved issues among the various ethnic communities. These include indigenous groups, as well as communities such as taxi drivers. For instance, Sabahans and Sarawakians who, in the past, have been positive in hoping that the federal government would address their issues, are now expressing dissatisfaction, which they have threatened to reflect in the next elections if they feel that their plight falls on deaf ears. Such dissatisfaction may greatly impact the outcome of the next elections.

Anger evident amongst the Indian community pre-2008 elections has now lessened as issues such as citizenship, the demolishing of temples, religious conversion and Tamil schools have faded. The Prime Minister directly intervened in issues affecting the Indian community and responded to the lower segment of the community that had hoped to be heard. Efforts such as increased funding and the establishment of a cabinet committee and a taskforce for the Indian community have drawn support.



Denison Jayasooria and Steven C M Wong



Saifuddin Abdullah and Andrew Aeria

However, the Prime Minister's attention has greatly polarized the Indian community as much as it has drawn support towards Barisan Nasional. Most popular leaders in the Indian community are in Pakatan Rakyat. Tamil newspapers strongly cover opposition-friendly news. Middle and upper class Indian communities remain sceptical of the Barisan Nasional despite the Prime Minister's popularity.

The choice of candidates on both sides of the political divide is crucial. Indian voters make an important difference at a time of deep division in Malay votes and a complete swing in Chinese votes. It is becoming more challenging for politicians, especially from Barisan Nasional, to champion race-based issues while appealing to a broader section of voters. Resolved issues were mostly short-term, whereas long-term issues such as leadership in the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) remained outstanding. The Indian community was not seeing sufficient changes on the ground, especially in relation to political interaction and engagement. Nonetheless, they were mindful that they lacked a bargaining position and would therefore be cautious in giving either side of the divide their fullest support. Should the federal government

change hands, Denison predicted a critical period of unrest. The royalty and older leaders may need to play a crucial role then.

Denison shared Saifuddin's view that the 'invited space' for participatory democracy has dwindled. Most mainstream media were tighter in choosing their panelists. Unlike civil society, the civil service was not ready for public discourse. Where avenues exist, implementation and delivery of findings have met with resistance.

Dr Andrew Aeria described Barisan Nasional's position in Sabah and Sarawak as unfavourable. He attributed this to the Chief Ministers, Datuk Musa Aman and Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, respectively. Besides overstaying, both are faced with allegations of money laundering, corruption, nepotism, cronyism and the wrongful accumulation of wealth by close family members and other Barisan Nasional leaders. These have posed major challenges to the ruling party, particularly as these allegations were backed by evidence from reliable sources such as court proceedings and reputable non-government organizations.

Despite the challenges, the ruling coalition remained largely coherent thanks to its incumbency, its reliance upon its civil service and its ability to tap into federal and state financial resources. However, Sabah and Sarawak are no longer fixed deposits for Barisan Nasional, and this is reflected by the defections to the opposite camp.

Pakatan Rakyat's state of leadership in both states, however, similar to the ruling coalition's leadership, was also unfavourable. Its leaders showed little sign of meeting regularly, cooperating strategically, or communicating with one another. Political decisions were dictated by the leadership in Kuala Lumpur, as opposed to the autonomy principle long held by the people and therefore created much tension in these states.

In addition, Pakatan Rakyat has shied away from working with local opposition parties such as STAR, SAPP and SNAP that may disrupt electoral outcomes for both Barisan Nasional and the Pakatan Rakyat. Without co-operation with local opposition parties, Pakatan Rakyat's prospect of victory in these states in the coming elections will be jeopardized. This is because a multi-corner fight can split the votes. A one-to-one contest is crucial in ensuring that Pakatan Rakyat makes headway in the polls. Moreover, many potential leaders were of variable quality, having previously failed to rise in other parties.

Barisan Nasional's manifesto, on the one hand, carried a transformational agenda, although it maintained its approach to race-

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based policies and was driven by large infrastructure development. Pakatan Rakyat's manifesto, on the other hand, was a reform-oriented agenda, but with little indication on ways to deliver on their promises.

Despite the different agendas, however, both parties would have to address the burning issues -- some longstanding -- of persistent poverty and income inequality, proprietary rights to land, access to and quality of healthcare and education services, documentation of citizenship which impacts access to public services, and labour issues such as employment, migrant labour and minimum wage.

In closing, Dr Andrew remarked that the next elections will be extremely crucial. Governments derive legitimacy from the conduct of clean, free and fair elections. One cannot merely take the Election Commission's word that the elections are conducted in a fair and clean manner. These qualities in an election should be perceived by all stakeholders, including ordinary citizens and the international community.