

Malaysia's Political Outlook 2012

At Session Five of the ISIS Praxis Seminar 2012 the panellists were **Datuk A Kadir Jasin**, Editor-in-Chief Berita Publishing, Sdn, Malaysia, **Ms Rita Sim**, Director, Media Chinese International Ltd. Malaysia, **Mr Wan Saiful Wan Jan**, Chief Executive, Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), Malaysia, **Prof James UH Chin**, Professor and Head of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University, Sunway Campus, Malaysia. The Session was moderated by **Dato' Dr Mahani Zainal Abidin**, Chief Executive, ISIS Malaysia. Report compiled by ISIS research staff.



(From left) Wan Saiful Wan Jan, A. Kadir Jasin, Mahani Zainal Abidin, Rita Sim and James UH Chin

The Objective

As 2012 is speculated to be an election year, planning for it includes understanding the political environment of the year in order to supplement economic and development forecasts. Calculated projections based on empirical data and analysis shaped this discussion with the hope of shedding light on the main question posed by the moderator at the beginning of the session that discussed Malaysia's Political Outlook in 2012: 'When will the elections be held and how will the voters vote?'

Backdrop

In 2008, Barisan Nasional (BN) won by 51.4 per cent, securing 79 seats. The ruling coalition was eight seats short of the 2/3rd majority; in the previous elections, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi had secured 61.2 per cent of the votes.

UMNO is the single largest political party and has 239 out of 505 state seats. However in 2008, BN lost its hold on five states because of a swing of five per cent in Malay votes. The second largest party, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) had 31 seats, 18 of which were given by PAS. Therefore, negotiations of seats and the area of contestation are very important for PR as historically opposition parties have always secured more than 40 per cent of the total votes in the country.

Although the three year by-election time-frame period has expired, an unprecedented 16 by-elections were held, with the score standing equally on both sides at 8-8.

The highest number of people who did not vote was recorded from BN majority areas while in the previous elections the highest number of spoilt votes and those who did not register to vote were recorded from those areas too. In Johor

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three in every 100 votes were spoilt while Malacca and Pahang recorded similar figures.

Implications of the Sarawak Elections

Sabah and Sarawak have always been BN's 'fixed deposits.' In the last Sarawak Elections, BN secured 55 of the 71 seats contested while DAP doubled their seat count to 12. However it has been observed that there is opposition against the current Sabah Chief Minister, Datuk Seri Panglima Haji Musa bin Haji Aman and the Sarawak Chief Minister Pehin Sri Haji Abdul Taib bin Mahmud. Furthermore, a political transition is taking place within the Kadazan-Dusun community, caused by factions in the PBB and SUPP, while UPKO has been very vocal about its discontent. It was felt that the political dividend was not paid in electing a Deputy Prime Minister from East Malaysia, despite being given the posts of speaker and deputy speakers. Besides that, land issues and the influx of illegals to East Malaysia are significant issues that voters want addressed and resolved.

Prognosis

The 2012 political outlook hinges on when the general elections will be held and speculation has it that it will be in the first quarter of the year. Based on the 2008 election results, it is clear that the BN no longer monopolises Malaysian politics. The coming elections will be an uphill battle for both political factions; for PKR to attain power and for BN to maintain its hold.

In order to recover its position, the regime has to address the many demands raised by the various communities. This includes issues that the average voter is interested in – the day-to-day

concerns ranging from food shortages, inflation and crime rates to under-employment, unemployment and the increased number of legal and illegal migrant workers.

It was observed that the people are comfortable with a BN government that is not too strong and based on previous election findings, if the BN wins, it will not be because it has improved tremendously but because the opposition has not shown the cohesion it did during the campaigning for the 2008 election.

There is no doubt the media will have a major influence on the election. In the last decade, the traditional media has lost ground while online readership has increased, although it was noted that information available online has a tendency to be not very accurate nor are the purveyors accountable. However some analysts have suggested that 70 per cent of the voters have already made up their minds while 30 per cent remain floating voters. The panelists also observed that political power does not rest in urban areas but depends on rural areas.

While speculation is rife about a looming election, the following will be important factors in determining when the elections will take place.

- I. Political sentiment;
- II. Voting trend of states and cohorts;
- III. Political economy; and
- IV. Readiness of the election machinery

Election Projection

- Malaysia follows the 'first-past-the-post' system where very small votes can determine a very big outcome;
- 222 parliamentary seats will be contested, matching that of the 12th General Elections;
- 28 April 2013 marks the end of the parliamentary term, meaning that the elections can be held as late as mid 2013;
- BN will win but with an even smaller majority;

- By 2020, the demographics of Malaysia will be 70 per cent Malay-Bumiputera and 30 per cent non-Malays. Today that figure stands at 60 per cent Malay-Bumiputera and 40 per cent non-Malays. However the voting population is 55 per cent Malay-Bumiputera and 45 per cent non-Malay voters;
- Many young Malays are eligible to vote but do not register to vote while non-Malays are highly aware of their duty to vote. Eight out of ten Chinese eligible to vote are registered as voters;
- 21-29 year olds show support for BN;
- Chinese support has dropped for BN while PR does not have much Malay support; however Malay support for PKR is brought in by PAS supporters;
- Hindraf caused BN to lose the majority of its Indian supporters; however there are no Indian majority seats but Indians are equally an important component with mixed seats;
- DAP will most likely retain Penang.

Key Issues

- Chinese education issue;
- Conversion issues;
- Perak constitutional crisis;
- Acquiescence towards Perkasa;
- PPSMI flip-flopping;
- The NFC case; and
- The false 'Freedom of Assembly Bill'.

Wish List

- Clearer government commitment to implement economic liberalisation and political reforms;
- A shift towards ideology-based debates and less ethno-religious division;
- Government agencies understand that they serve the government of the day and are not biased in pledging allegiance to any one political party.



Participants at the seminar

