

Message, Medium and Mobilisation in Malaysia: **Paradigm Shift** or Business as Usual?

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Elections in Malaysia were described by Harold Crouch in his contribution to *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (1996) as “no more than a ritual providing a cloak of legitimacy for what is really authoritarian rule”, where they “allow critics to let off a little steam while giving the government a useful means of gauging the level of public dissatisfaction.” By that yardstick, the results of Malaysia’s twelfth general elections on March 8, 2008 were nothing short of remarkable. Islamists, secular democrats, and Malay reformists – all from the opposition – somehow managed to surmount their differences and cobble together a formal alliance which managed to deal a major blow to the ruling National Front coalition. Led by the indefatigable Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister who was unceremoniously sacked and jailed for alleged corruption and sexual misconduct in 1998, this opposition coalition, which would later take on the name of the Peoples’ Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat), managed to deny the National Front a two-thirds parliamentary majority, no mean feat by Malaysian standards. Not only that, the opposition also managed to inflict upon the incumbent regime a string of defeats in a concurrent series of state-level local elections which resulted in five state legislatures falling into their hands. This was a feat never before achieved by the political opposition in Malaysia. The election results of 2008 were all the more poignant given how the National Front had won a landslide victory when the country last went to the polls a mere four years earlier, in 2004.

The March 8 election results clearly showed up the weaknesses of the Abdullah Badawi administration. Over and above that, the elections were significant for two further reasons. First, there was a marked departure from the communal narrative that had long dominated political discourse in Malaysia. Although the opposition coalition consisted of Islamists and non-Muslim activists, it managed to jettison tried-and-tested practices of falling back on ethnic and religious affinities, and instead based its appeal to a cross-section of the public on shared aspirations for justice, welfare, and anti-corruption. Second, more so than in any previous election, the new media was effectively used as alternative vehicles for the transmission and dissemination of information detrimental to the cause of the incumbent. New patterns of mobilisation in Malaysian politics then, rested on these twin pillars of message (post-communalism) and medium (new media). Evidently, both combined to such remarkable effect that observers quickly pronounced the advent of a “new politics” that successfully surmounted what seemed insurmountable in Malaysia – primordial identification and race-based politics.

Much of the hope underpinning predictions of a new era of politics in Malaysia stems from the notable changes in the means of political mobilisation. That is, the opposition appears to have found new ways to reach the populace on a large scale, bypassing the conventional instruments of information dissemination in the process (which in any case work to favour the incumbent over the opposition). The 2008 election was very much an 'internet election', where the opposition's political campaign was run, with the help of an activist civil sphere, primarily online, and to devastating effect. Indeed, so significant was the role of new media that even incumbent leaders have conceded that their inability or reluctance to factor the role of the new media into their overall strategy was arguably their biggest tactical mistake.

More important than the means of mobilisation, however, is the message. In this regard, it bears noting that the hope for a new dawn in Malaysia's political narratives does not appear to have been borne out in the events that have followed since. To be sure, what was initially striking about the 2008 reversal of fortunes for the contestants was the fact that it resulted from an erosion of the dominant narrative. This time, it was the Peoples' Alliance that played on the fears of the non-Malays regarding minority rights, drawing attention to the Abdullah government's inability to protect the respective communities from the gradual erosion of freedom of worship in a number of controversial, high profile cases of religious conversions and "body-snatching"¹. At the same time, the opposition also focused on numerous scandals and abuse of power that had been uncovered by the instruments of new media, not only to lay siege on the incumbent, but also to underpin a consensus shared across the ethno-political spectrum for new models of governance based on judicial reform, democratic pluralism, anti-corruption, and social justice.

However, as the euphoria of victory gave way to the reality of incumbency it soon became clear that one of the immediate and pressing challenges confronting the opposition coalition was the need to cement the opposition alliance, or at least to minimise ruptures to it arising from differences in ideologies, interests, and goals. To that effect, initial analyses of voting patterns were encouraging. The PAS and DAP electoral machineries cooperated extensively during the campaigning. As a result, PAS triumphed not only in its core rural Malay-Muslim constituencies, but also in several others with high concentrations of non-Malays. Likewise, the DAP won in many mixed constituencies, whether ethnic Malay support often tilted the balance to their favour in close contests. Outperforming both parties though, was the resurgent PKR, which was winning solid support from both ethnic minorities as well as urban Malay voters.

Beyond the immediate exigencies of campaign politics, the real litmus test of Malaysia's resolve to transcend race and ethnicity, in particular the promulgation of the ideology of Malay primacy, is the continued relevance of affirmative action policies launched under the New Economic Policy (NEP), a national economic program implemented in 1970 with the aim of leveling the economic playing field between the Malays and other ethnic groups (notably, the Chinese). To that end, it is noteworthy that on the campaign

¹ "Body-snatching" is the colloquial term used in Malaysia to describe incidents where state Islamic religious authorities intervene in non-Muslim funerals to confiscate the body of the deceased on the grounds that the deceased was in fact a Muslim and hence had to be buried under Muslim rites. This has become a particularly controversial practice in Malaysia because state Islamic religious authorities often do not, or are unable to, produce verifiable evidence that the deceased had actually converted to Islam before his or her death.

trail Anwar Ibrahim declared categorically that the opposition would dispense with the NEP and race-based affirmative action policies if it came to power. Campaign rhetoric aside, the practical dismantling this thirty-eight year old policy of affirmative action proved much more difficult. Soon after DAP gained control of the state of Penang, the chief minister announced that he would do away with the NEP and adopt a tender-based system for contracts. This provoked harsh reactions from Malay politicians, including leaders of PAS. Recognising of the brewing rift, Anwar attempted to calm the situation by suggesting that while the affirmative action policies under the NEP were problematic, they needed to be reformed rather than abolished outright. Evident from Anwar's shift in position is the explicit unwillingness on the part of Malay leaders – even among those from the Peoples' Alliance – to move away wholesale from affirmative action policies.

Debates over affirmative action within the Peoples' Alliance speak to deeper concerns regarding the viability and sustainability of this coalition and its attempt to transcend the dominant narratives of race and ethnicity. It bears recalling the fate of the Alternative Front formed to contest the 1999 general election, which collapsed because it was eventually unable to reconcile the interests of the DAP and PAS, the latter of which was resolute in its pursuit of the Islamic state objective. Given the memory of that recent failure, the success of the Peoples' Alliance as a real alternative to the National Front will undoubtedly hinge on continued collegiality and cooperation between component parties. To that end, there are reasons to be skeptical of the resilience of the DAP-PAS leg of the alliance. Ideologically, the parties are poles apart, even though they have endeavoured to cement their relations within the rubric of the Peoples' Alliance by registering the coalition as an official institution. Given the mass of ideological tensions which are currently barely papered over, it should not be a surprise that since the elections problems have surfaced on several occasions between DAP and PAS, above all over the Islamic state objective of PAS that has historically impeded cooperation and set the two parties against each other.

Doubts over the longer-term viability of the alliance have been compounded by rumors of a potential coalition between UMNO and PAS. Soon after the March 8 election, it became evident that part of UMNO's strategy to regain lost ground was to reach out to PAS on the premise of "Malay-Muslim unity." Almost immediately after the election results were announced, the upper echelon of the UMNO leadership extended an olive branch to PAS on the grounds that the fractures in the Malay-Muslim community caused by UMNO-PAS rivalry needed to be healed given that non-Muslim minorities were becoming increasingly assertive of their rights and questioning the principle of Malay primacy.

The fact that a certain segment of the PAS leadership responded to UMNO overtures caused much disquiet not only among the party rank and file, which was unsure of what to make of the mixed signals being sent, but also for the other component parties of the Peoples' Alliance as well, whose leaders expressed frustration and disappointment that they were neither informed nor consulted on a matter which had such potentially explosive consequences. Even more shocking was the fact that the first meeting took place barely a few days after the elections and explored the possibility of localised UMNO-PAS coalitions in Selangor, which was won by the opposition.

The issue of cooperation with UMNO was raised and intensely debated at the PAS general assemblies of August 2008 and June 2009. While some senior stalwarts defended the party leadership's decision to accept UMNO invitations for dialogue, most of the rank and file disapproved the move. By virtue of being the most senior leader involved in some of the talks, PAS deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa bore the brunt of the criticisms. In response to the sentiments from the ground, the leadership of PAS declared its continued commitment to the Peoples' Alliance at the end of the meeting. Yet despite this attempt to close ranks and bring the issue to a close, elements within PAS continue to entertain the possibility of future cooperation with UMNO for several reasons. First, some within PAS leadership circles continue to

harbour reservations towards Anwar, and are hesitant about wholeheartedly supporting his leadership role in the opposition movement. While PAS is prepared to accept Anwar's current role as the leader of the opposition, major figures in the party have raised doubts about his seemingly unbridled ambition. Second, the long-term future of the Peoples' Alliance remains murky to many within the PAS leadership, particularly given the DAP's staunch opposition to their Islamic state objective. Indeed, the conservative elements of the PAS leadership see the DAP as a major hurdle to the party's ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic state in Malaysia. As a consequence, while the party remains committed to the opposition alliance it is not under any delusions regarding its limitations. Third, there remains a pool of PAS leaders who share UMNO's concern regarding the increasing assertiveness of the non-Malays, and the threat that this would pose to Malay-Muslim primacy. This uncertainty is compounded by the fact that PAS has been relegated from its previous position as the second most powerful party in Malaysia in 1999 (by virtue of the number of parliamentary seats it controlled) to the fourth in the pecking order, behind PKR and DAP.

In sum, contrary to the aspirations to transcend race-based politics articulated by the opposition during the election, the communal framework still holds sway, while ethnic, racial, and religious referents remain factored into the calculations of the members of the Peoples' Alliance; fundamental ideological cleavages persist, and the narrative of Malay supremacy continues to weigh down the prospects for democratic pluralism in Malaysia. ■

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