

Secular Dealignment and Party System Transition in Malaysia

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Abstract

The Malaysian electoral behaviour has for some time reflected the ‘partisan identification’ thesis. Since 1999, however, there has been a marked shift towards ‘secular dealignment’. Analyses of electoral and survey data reveal that although a significant number of Malaysian voters remained attached to the party they identified with, most of the electorate, however, are swayed by short-term factors. Though the economic issues played a role in the three elections, it is the leadership of the parties supplemented by the use of mass media that played a significant role in swinging the vote from one party to the other. The three elections in 1999, 2004, and 2008 can be categorized as evidence of secular dealignment: the 1999 elections substantially reduced the margin of gain by the ruling coalition; the 2004 elections reversed the opposition gain, while the 2008 elections resulted in the loss of two-thirds majority seats in the parliament habitually enjoyed by the ruling coalition and the emergence of a strong opposition coalition. This trend not merely continued but was much more stronger in the 13th Malaysian general election.

Introduction

The study of electoral choice in Malaysia has subscribed overwhelmingly to the partisan identification thesis, according to which people are likely to vote for the party they are attached to.¹ In the heuristic framework of Pippa Norris, these elections are characterized as ‘maintaining alignments’, reflecting the status quo in the party system. Such elections produce neither the incumbency turnover nor the changes of

¹ See Angus Campbell, P. Converse, W. Miller, and D. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960), Chapter 6. Russell Dalton and Martin Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Russell Dalton (2004) *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

government.² The results of the general election held in March 2008, in which the ruling coalition lost substantial number of votes and seats to the opposition, have been interpreted by some scholars as evidence of what Norris terms as ‘secular dealignment’ in which ‘the government in power may be returned to office, as in maintaining contests, but nevertheless beneath the ice the underlying condition of electoral support become destabilized, less predictable, and potentially more fluid.’³ It means that the ‘affective attachment’ of a voter to a party is in decline, implying that the electorate’s vote choice is influenced more by issues, candidates, or party leaders than by party identification. In other words, voting behaviour is determined by short-term political factors rather than the loyalty to a party.⁴ Voting under such circumstances may result in a party losing enough votes and seats in one election, but may, by adopting positive policies and displaying charismatic personalities, regain the support in the next. Secular dealignment thus may produce a more unstable electorate open to the sway of short-term forces. It may destabilize the system: the construction of coherent legislative majorities may be difficult and the system may witness the surge of protest politics. Secular dealignment can be explained by referring, among others, to poor performance of government and leaders, intensive mass media coverage, and the nature of economic growth and development.⁵ Analysing secular dealignment is warranted by the fact that it has the potential, at least in the short-run, of destabilizing the political system. The fact that secular dealignment may, in the long run, transform the prevalent party system makes such a study all the more compelling. This paper begins with a brief introduction to the Malaysian political system to describe the nature of maintaining elections and to provide the essential foundations for subsequent analysis. This is followed by an examination of the voting behaviour of the Malaysian electorate in the 1999, 2004, and 2008 elections and of the factors associated with varying electoral outcomes. The three elections in succession exhibit all the characteristics of secular dealignment.

The Malaysian political system: maintaining elections

Malaysia consists of two land masses separated by part of the South China Sea. West Malaysia, with an area of 131,313 square kilometres (50,700 square miles), comprises 11 states and the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya. East Malaysia, with an area of 201,320 square kilometres (77,730 square miles), consists of the states of Sabah and Sarawak and the federal territory of Labuan. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has evolved from a sleepy colonial outpost to a vibrant society with a thriving

² Pippa Norris, *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 219–220. Norris’s framework distinguishes among maintaining alignments, secular dealignment, deviating dealignment, secular realignment, and critical realignments.

³ Norris, *Radical Right*, p. 221.

⁴ See E. Schickler and D. Green, ‘The Stability of Party Identification in Western Democracies’, *Science*, 44:1 (1997), 35–50; Larry Bartels, ‘Partisanship and Voting Behaviour, 1952–1996’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 44:1 (2000), 35–50; Russell Dalton and Martin Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵ Dalton and Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties without Partisans*, p. 51.

economy. According to 2008 estimates, Malaysia had a population of 27,728,700 and the population growth rate was 2.0%.⁶ Malaysia is a multi-cultural society and contains three main racial groups: Malays, comprising about 60% of the population; Chinese, making up about a quarter of the population; Indians, comprising about 7% of the population; and others. The plural condition of Malaysia was formed through British immigration policies during colonial rule, from the late eighteenth century to 1957, and it was concretized in an ethnic division of labour, with Malays in state bureaucracy and agriculture, Chinese in commerce and tin mines, and Indians in plantations.⁷ The Independence Constitution of 1957 took Malaysia's pluralism very much into account. Article 95B, which provides for the establishment of native court systems in addition to the existing common law and *Shari'ah* (Islamic law), is aimed at protecting the heritage of distinct cultures throughout Malaysia. Ethnic identification is also perpetuated by most political parties. However, the governing Barisan Nasional (National Front or BN) is a multi-racial coalition.

Malaysia operates a 'power-sharing' political system, which was introduced by the coalition government that took over from the British. The coalition, called the Alliance, had three original member parties, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), representing the interests of the three major ethnic communities. However, this system of elite accommodation and displacement was formally halted in 1969 due to race riots in Kuala Lumpur. With the restoration of law and order in the country, other political parties were allowed to join the Alliance, which, in August 1972, led to the formation of Barisan Nasional in which UMNO remained *primus inter pares* in the coalition. It absorbed nearly all opposition parties and transferred potentially divisive issues from public arenas to the informal processes of inter-communal bargaining between leaders of various race-based political parties.⁸ This has given rise to an oligarchic style of government characterized by restrictions on assembly, the strategic use of detention orders, and other legal and emergency powers. Consequently, the post-1969 Malaysian polity has variously been termed as a fettered democracy, a quasi democracy, a modified democracy, or a semi-democracy.⁹ Nevertheless, Malaysian government has regularly conducted multi-party elections, and the Barisan Nasional coalition has consistently

⁶ Population Statistics from Department of Statistics Malaysia, available at http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Economics/files/DATA_SERIES/2009/Bab_21Perangkaan_Penduduk.pdf (accessed 17 May 2009).

⁷ Clive S. Kessler, 'Archaism and Modernity: Contemporary Malay Political Culture', in Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds.), *Framed Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), pp. 140–141.

⁸ Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 27–35.

⁹ Chandra Muzaffar, *Freedom in Fetters* (Penang: Aliran, 1986); Zakaria Haji Ahmad, 'Malaysia: Quasi Democracy in a Divided Society', in L. Diamond, J. J. Linz, and S. M. Lipset (eds.), *Democracy in Developing Countries*, vol. 3 *Asia* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1989), pp. 347–381; Harold Crouch, 'Malaysia: Neither Authoritarian nor Democratic', in K. Hewison, R. Robison, and G. Rodan (eds.), *Southeast Asia in the 1990s: Authoritarianism, Democracy and Capitalism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993),

Table 1. Results of Elections for the Lower House of Parliament (*Dewan Rakyat*), 1969–1995

Election year	Ruling party			Opposition			Total number of seats
	Number of seats	Percent of seats	Percent of votes	Number of seats	Percent of seats	Percent of votes	
1969	95	66.00	49.3	49	34.00	50.7	144
1974	135	87.66	60.7	19	12.34	39.3	154
1978	130	84.42	57.2	24	15.58	42.8	154
1982	132	85.71	60.5	22	14.29	39.5	154
1986	148	83.62	55.8	29	16.38	41.5	177
1990	127	70.55	53.4	53	29.45	46.6	180
1995	162	84.38	65.2	30	15.62	34.8	192

Source: Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 6; Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 75.

won two-thirds majority of seats in the parliament (see table 1). This is the basis for the partisan identification thesis, which Pippa Norris termed ‘maintaining elections’ in Malaysia.

The three ‘dealigning’ elections

The 12th Malaysian general election held on 8 March 2008 could be characterized as a ‘secular dealigning’ election. Firstly, as in previous elections, the ruling coalition was returned to power, with, however, a reduced majority in the parliament. The governing coalition suffered its worst defeat losing, for the first time since 1969, a two-thirds majority in the *Dewan Rakyat* (the Malaysian lower house of Parliament). This has effectively curtailed the power of the ruling coalition, the BN, either to override legislation passed by the states or to amend the Federal Constitution at will. Secondly, the share of the BN popular vote dipped significantly. The BN received only 49.79% of the votes in the peninsula (West Malaysia) capturing 85 parliamentary seats. The BN performed well in Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) and captured 55 out of 57 seats. It is the East Malaysian electorate whose vote gave the BN the majority to form the government. The opposition captured the remaining 82 seats, its best showing in the electoral history of Malaysia (see table 2). It is worth noting that 80 of the opposition’s 82 seats came from West Malaysia.

Thirdly, the candidates of the opposition parties did very well, especially in urban areas, winning ten of the 11 seats in Kuala Lumpur, the commercial capital of Malaysia.

p. 21; William Case, ‘Semi-Democracy in Malaysia: Withstanding the Pressures for Regime Change’, *Pacific Affairs*, 66:2 (1993), 183–205; William Case, *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

Table 2. Results of Malaysian parliamentary election by state, 8 March 2008

State	Seats won				Vote (percent)			Turnout (percent)	Spoilt votes (percent)
	BN	BA	Others	Total	BN	BA	Others		
Johor	25	1	–	26	65.3	32.8	1.9	74.2	3.1
Kedah	4	11	–	15	46.8	55.2	–	77.5	2.3
Kelantan	2	12	–	14	44.7	55.0	0.3	82.6	1.8
Kuala Lumpur	1	10	–	11	37.9	61.9	0.1	73.5	0.9
Melaka	5	1	–	6	57.4	42.5	–	77.1	2.6
Negri Sembilan	5	3	–	8	54.7	80.1	0.2	74.8	2.9
Pahang	12	2	–	14	59.5	40.5	–	75.0	2.7
Penang	2	11	–	13	38.7	61.1	0.2	77.6	1.4
Perak	13	11	–	24	46.5	53.3	0.2	71.0	2.5
Perlis	3	0	–	3	60.1	39.9	–	78.8	2.2
Selangor*	6	17	–	23	44.4	55.3	0.3	75.3	2.1
Terengganu	7	1	–	8	55.1	44.7	0.2	83.5	1.4
West Malaysia	85	80	0	165	49.8	49.8	0.4	76.0	2.2
Sabah*	25	1	–	26	61.9	32.3	5.8	67.1	2.9
Sarawak	30	1	–	31	64.4	28.7	6.8	65.2	1.2
East Malaysia	55	2	–	57	63.2	30.5	6.3	66.1	2.1
Malaysia	140	82	–	222	51.5	47.3	1.2	74.5	2.2

Notes: The BN won eight seats uncontested (Johor 1, Sabah 2, Sarawak 5). The BA (*Barisan Alternatif*) refers to the electoral pact between the DAP, PAS, and PKR. After the 2008 elections, the electoral pact is known as *Pakatan Rakyat*, or People's Alliance.

*Results for Selangor and Sabah include the separate federal territories of Putrajaya and Labuan, formerly part of their respective states.

Source: Calculation based on *His Majesty's Government Gazette* (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2008), 52:7 (8 April 2008).

In the concurrent elections for assemblies in 12 states, the BN won majorities in seven, conceding five states to the opposition. In the State of Penang, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) with 19 state seats formed the government in coalition with the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), and the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR or People's Justice Party). Penang, with a majority of Chinese voters, is a major industrial centre, producing microchips, mobile phones, and computer parts in factories owned by Intel, Dell, and Motorola, among many others. In Kedah, the opposition took 22 of the 36 state seats. The PAS, in alliance with the PKR and DAP, formed the state government. In Selangor, considered to be a safe stronghold of Barisan Nasional, the opposition parties won 35 of the 56 state seats and formed the government. They chose Abdul Khalid Ibrahim of the PKR as the chief minister since the State Constitution requires an indigenous Muslim Malaysian to be the chief executive officer. Perak was one of the tightly contested states with the BN winning 28 state assembly seats and the opposition

coalition winning 31 seats. The majority of the opposition members came from the DAP but, as required by the State Constitution, a Muslim Malaysian, Mohammad Nizar Jamaluddin of the PAS, was named as the chief minister of the state. Finally, the PAS not merely retained its control of the state of Kelantan but won back a sizable number of seats, 38 of the 45, which it had lost to the BN–UMNO in the 2004 election.¹⁰ Observers of the 2008 elections have likened the results to a ‘political tsunami’.¹¹ Others dubbed it a ‘perfect storm’ or a ‘seismic shift’ in Malaysia’s electoral history.¹² The election result nullifies the partisan identification thesis, suggesting instead a secular dealignment amongst voters in Malaysia and heralding a two-coalition party system the beginning of which could be traced to the general elections held in 1999. The 1999 elections were significant for two reasons. Firstly, this was the first general election since prime minister Mahathir Mohamad sacked his deputy Anwar Ibrahim from all government positions and expelled him from the party in September 1998. Anwar’s dismissal and subsequent jailing sparked unprecedented anti-government protests. Secondly, in this election four opposition parties allied to form the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front or BA) and mounted a coordinated campaign to unseat the ruling BN from power or, as a minimum, to deny its two-thirds majority in the national Parliament. The 1999 election results were mixed, though somewhat favourable to the ruling coalition. Nevertheless, it reflected all the characteristics of a secular dealignment. The BN retained its two-thirds majority in parliament but with reduced seats and reduced votes. The BN won 148 seats, much less than the 166 it held before Parliament was dissolved. It won 56.51% of total votes cast, down from 65.14% in 1995. Four Malay cabinet ministers and the chief minister of Terengganu lost in the election. Mahathir retained his Kubang Pasu parliamentary seat in Kedah, but his winning margin had shrunk by about 40% from 1995. Most of the UMNO candidates won by slim margins. The national unity and social development minister won with a majority of 803 votes and the education minister, who was also an UMNO vice-president, won with a meager 241 votes. The worst performance was in Kelantan where the BN obtained only 38.91% votes and only one parliamentary seat, followed by Terengganu (41.24%) with no parliamentary seats. In constituencies where two-thirds of voters were Malays, UMNO received 48.6% of the votes compared to 60.8% in 1995. The opposition parties together won 45 seats, far fewer than the 65 needed to break the ruling coalition’s two-thirds majority. According to one contestant, who lost by a narrow margin, ‘the people were angry but not angry enough to put us in the governing seats’.¹³ It is the anger of the electorate and not the change of government that characterizes this election as secular dealigning. Among the

¹⁰ Thomas B. Pepinsky, ‘The 2008 Malaysian Elections: An End to Malaysian Politics?’, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 9 (2009), 96.

¹¹ Lorien Holland, ‘MALAYSIA: Political Tsunami’, *Newsweek*, 10 March 2008.

¹² Steven Gan, ‘The Perfect Storm on March 8’, *Malaysiakini*, 19 March 2008, available at <http://www.malaysiakini.com> (accessed 11 April 2009); Kwang Yang Sim, ‘New Political Sky: A New Game’, *Malaysiakini*, 15 March 2008, available at www.malaysiakini.com (accessed 15 June 2009).

¹³ Chandra Muzaffar, ‘Interview’, *The Star*, 2 December 1999, p. 7.

opposition, the biggest winner was the PAS with 27 of the 42 parliamentary seats won by the Barisan Alternatif. The PAS not only retained the state of Kelantan but it also captured the neighbouring, oil-rich, Terengganu. In addition, it managed to secure more gains for itself in other Malay dominated states of Kedah with 40.4%, Perlis with 38.9%, and Pahang with 28.3% of popular votes. The DAP won ten parliamentary and 11 state seats as against the nine parliamentary and 11 state seats it won in 1995. The Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party or KeADILan), the torchbearer of secular democratic governance, won five parliamentary and four state seats and garnered 752,255 votes in the parliamentary contest. In at least six other parliamentary constituencies, its candidates lost by very narrow margins of less than 2,000 votes.¹⁴ The 1999 election results showed changes in the behaviour of the electorate with Malays venting their grievances against the UMNO and the Chinese voting the government to benefit from the economic up-swing.

The BA could not continue to work as a team. The DAP parted acrimoniously with the PAS, unwilling to accept the latter's insistence on establishing an Islamic state in Malaysia. The cordiality between the PAS and KeADILAN also waned with the death, in June 2002, of the PAS leader Fadzil Noor, who had been instrumental in bringing the two parties together. The DAP also became estranged from the KeADILan, accusing the party of trying to impose its will on DAP members. The opposition disunity affected their performance in the 2004 elections.¹⁵ The election results took most Malaysians by surprise, including some top UMNO leaders, who had not expected such a big win. The BN won 90.4% of the seats in Parliament, its best showing since it was formed in 1974. It won 62.37% of the 7.10 million votes cast, up from 56.5% in 1999. It made a clean sweep of all parliamentary seats in seven states, winning 198 seats and scoring a nine-tenths majority. For the state assemblies, a state-by-state analysis of the voting shows that the BN won all but one seat each in Pahang, Perlis, Johor, and Sabah. In another four states, the BN conceded only two seats, each to the opposition. Interestingly, the BN recaptured the state of Terengganu from the PAS and almost won the state of Kelantan but for two seats. The UMNO, the leading component of the BN, appeared to have won back some of the Malay support it lost in the 1999 elections. In the parliamentary seats, the BN's Chinese and Indian partners performed well, with MCA winning 31 of 40 seats, Gerakan ten of 12 seats, and MIC winning all nine seats it contested.

The 2004 BN victory confirmed the 1999 results that the BN's dominance of the political system would continue and hence may be construed as an example of maintaining election. What makes the election dealigning is the unprecedented, massive swing of the vote from the opposition to the ruling coalition. The opposition taken

¹⁴ Hussin Mutalib, 'Malaysia's 1999 General Election: Signposts to Future Politics', *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 8:1 (2000), 69–72.

¹⁵ See Abdul Rashid Moten and Tunku Mohar Mokhtar. 'The 2004 General Elections in Malaysia: A Mandate to Rule', *Asian Survey*, 46:2 (2006), 319–340.

Table 3. Seats won in 2008, 2004 and 1999 parliamentary elections by party

Party	Seats won in 2008	Percent seats	Seats won in 2004	Percent seats	Seats won in 1999	Percent seats
Barisan Nasional	140	63.06	199	90.87	148	76.68
UMNO	79	35.58	110	50.22	72	37.30
MCA	15	6.80	31	14.16	28	14.51
MIC	3	1.40	9	4.11	7	3.63
Gerakan	2	0.90	10	4.56	6	3.11
Others	41	18.50	39	17.81	35	18.13
Opposition parties	82	36.94	19	8.67	42	21.76
DAP	28	12.60	12	5.48	10	5.19
PAS	23	10.40	6	2.74	27	13.99
PKR	31	14.00	1	0.46	5	2.59
Others	-	-	-	-	3	1.55
Independents	-	-	1	0.46	-	-
Total	222	100	219	100	193	100

Source: Calculation based on *His Majesty's Government Gazette* (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2008), 52:7, 8 April 2008; *His Majesty's Government Gazette* (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2004), 48:8, 12 April 2004; 'Election Results 2008', *New Straits Times* (10 March 2008), pp. Y1–Y40; A.R. Moten and Tunku Mohar Mokhtar, 'The 2004 General Elections in Malaysia: A Mandate to Rule', *Asian Survey*, 46:2 (2006), 331.

together won only 20 seats. The PAS suffered a crushing defeat. The party had 26 members in the old 193-member parliament, which, in 2004, was reduced to only seven in the enlarged 219-seat *Dewan Rakyat*. Both the president and secretary-general of the PAS lost the parliamentary seats they contested. Worse still, the PAS lost control of the state government in rural Terengganu. In Kelantan, the PAS's impregnable stronghold, it won 24 of 45 seats, one with a mere two-vote majority, and formed the government. The DAP won 12 parliamentary and 15 state seats and collected 694,575 votes, 9.78% of the total. The KeADILan won only one seat, securing 587,776 votes or 8.27% of the popular vote.

The three elections summarized in table 3 reveal volatility of electoral behaviour. In 1999, the electorate was 'angry' with the BN, which they expressed by voting in a substantial number of opposition members to the lower house. In 2004, pleased with the leadership of Abdullah Badawi and his reform agenda, they returned to the ruling coalition and gave it a victory unparalleled in Malaysia's electoral history. In 2008, the electorate deserted the ruling coalition and denied it the two-thirds majority, which it had habitually enjoyed.

Explaining secular dealignment

As stated, the decision to vote for a particular party or candidate, or not to vote at all, is made on the basis of a combination of long-term influences that determine a voter's partisan self-image, and short-term factors that cause him or her to vote in accordance with his or her self-image or to deviate from it. The volatility in the Malaysian electorate can be partly explained by such short-term factors as poor performance of government and leaders, intensive mass media coverage coupled with the emergence/re-birth of new parties, and the nature of economic growth and development.

The elections of 1999: the beginning of a two-party coalition system

The reduced majorities of the BN and the gains of the opposition in the 1999 elections are attributed in the short-run to the leadership tussle in the UMNO between Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim, then the prime minister and deputy prime minister respectively. Anwar had developed his populist credentials as a student activist and the leader of the Islamic youth movement, the *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM). He joined the UMNO and, with the blessings of Mahathir, held many important positions in the party and the government. He was perceived by many to be the likely successor to Mahathir. He was charismatic and enjoyed a good deal of support from the rank and file in the UMNO, which was factionalized because of the rift between the two leaders. Mahathir disagreed with Anwar's prescriptions to overcome the stagnating economy resulting from the financial crisis of 1997. He thought Anwar was 'attempting to undermine him'.¹⁶ Mahathir attacked Anwar Ibrahim's 'immoral character' in the media in 'crass and unethical' ways,¹⁷ including sexual perversions, sacked him as deputy prime minister, and had him expelled from UMNO in September 1998. Anwar was later tried in court and was sentenced to six years imprisonment on charges of corruption.¹⁸

The treatment meted out to Anwar alienated a significant segment of the Malays, whose political culture admonished those in authority from shaming their subordinates in public. They were also saddened by the way the government used courts and police to mount legal action against Anwar. Protests followed immediately, which soon developed into a full-fledged movement for reforms (*reformasi*). These reforms led first to the formation of Social Justice Movement and eventually emerged as Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party) on 4 April 1999 led by the wife of Anwar Ibrahim, Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. The Malaysian political scene at that time was viewed by

¹⁶ John Hilley, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition* (London: Zed Books, 2001), p. 108.

¹⁷ Mustafa K. Anwar, 'The Role of Malaysia's Mainstream Press in the 1999 General Election', in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Johan Saravanamuttu (eds.), *New politics in Malaysia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2003), p. 65.

¹⁸ Damien Kingsbury, *South-East Asia: A Political Profile* (South Melbourne: Oxford University, 2001), pp. 283–284.

many as in 'turmoil', with intermittent street demonstrations in the capital.¹⁹ Mahathir seems to have suffered a substantial loss of support from the Malays who eventually ended up joining the opposition PAS. Mahathir conceded that: '[A]pparently quite a large proportion of Malays, the indigenous people of Malaysia, have turned against the UMNO, their main political party.'²⁰ The Anwar episode and the *reformasi* helped pave the way for the emergence of the four-party alliance known as Barisan Alternatif, a united opposition front to the government headed by Mahathir. The components of the BA were the PAS, DAP, KeADILan, and PRM (Party Rakyat Malaysia or Malaysian People's Party). Anwar Ibrahim, though in jail, emerged as the rallying point as well as the ideological bridge among the opposition parties.²¹ The BA with the slogan 'Towards a Just Malaysia' mounted a serious campaign to deny two-thirds majority to the BN in the 1999 election.²² For the first time in Malaysian history, the opposition issued a common election manifesto and pooled common resources. The coalition nevertheless suffered from internal constraints. In the forefront of the BA was the PAS, which made the non-Muslim electorate somewhat uneasy. The PAS's proclaimed intention to transform Malaysia into an Islamic state alerted the non-Muslims. Likewise, the Chinese anchored DAP's controversial 'Malaysian Malaysia' agenda was unacceptable to the Malay electorate.

The BN, with the advantage of incumbency, mounted an effective campaign strategy to counter the BA. It tried to intimidate, especially the non-Muslim population, with the spectre of an Islamic state and of radical Islam alleged to be espoused by the PAS-led BA. More importantly, Mahathir focused his attention on economic development and stability. He instituted currency/capital controls to arrest the economic downturn following the Asian financial crisis. He restructured the banking and financial sectors through mergers, slashed interest rates down to 3–4% from 8–10%, and stimulated the economy through boosting exports and increased public spending. These measures had the desired positive results, which heartened the Malaysians in general, and the business oriented Chinese community in particular. Tellingly, the BN's election manifesto emphasized stability and economic development. The BA's campaign centred on human rights, social justice, and transparent democratic government. Observers of government and politics in Malaysia believed that the prudent handling of the economy made the electorate, particularly the Chinese community, vote for the ruling coalition. The ethnic Chinese, Mahathir explained, were impressed by the BN government which had fended off a vicious attack on the economy.²³ Mahathir's visit to China and the

¹⁹ Zakaria Haji Ahmad, 'Impact of the Economic Crisis on Malaysian Politics', in *The Financial Crisis in Malaysia: The Economic and Political Consequences, Trends in Southeast Asia*, No. 6. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), pp. 13–15; John Funston, 'Malaysia: A Fateful September', in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1999* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), pp. 165–184.

²⁰ Mahathir Mohamad, 'Changes in Thinking of the Malays', *New Straits Times*, 15 December 1999, p. 12.

²¹ Abdul Rashid Moten, 'The 1999 General Elections in Malaysia: Towards a Stable Democracy?', *Akademika*, 57, July 2000, pp. 72–73.

²² Hilley, *Malaysia*, p. 231.

²³ Mahathir Mohamad, 'Changes in Thinking of the Malays', *New Straits Times*, 15 December 1999, p. 12.

return five-day official visit to Malaysia by Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, six days before the elections, further augmented Chinese support for the BN. Simply put, many Chinese opted to 'vote for economic rewards'.²⁴ It was the non-Malay, Chinese, and Indian votes that helped the BN retain its two-thirds majority. The important thing to note is that the voting was based upon issues and personalities, and not on party loyalty.

The BN's victory was also due to the effective role the media played in the country. It is well-known that the government controls the Malaysian media through coercive legislation and, most importantly, through the ownership and control of the major publications by the entities linked to the BN.²⁵ UMNO and its allies own, through holdings and subsidiaries, majority stakes in *Utusan Melayu*, *Utusan Malaysia*, TV3, *The New Straits Times*, *Business Times*, *Shin Min Daily News*, and the like. Almost all the print media and the radio and television channels devoted much of their news programmes and election coverage to promote the government's achievements, to malign the Barisan Alternatif, and particularly to demonize Anwar Ibrahim. Over the nine-day campaign, the BN bought approximately 1,000 pages of full-page advertisement in all the local newspapers.

The opposition used their own bi-weeklies and monthly magazines to reach out to the people. They also made greater use of the Internet to reach voters. For the opposition forces receiving little mainstream media coverage, this new medium provided access to a wider audience. The opposition PAS, DAP, and KeADILan had interesting and well-kept websites that provided much information about party policies and programmes. There also emerged websites such as *Sangkancil*, *Laman Reformasi*, *FreeMalaysia*, and several others that provided a medley of news updates on current affairs and a forum for debate on issues in Malaysian politics and economy. Of special note was the emergence of the non-partisan *Malaysiakini.com*, launched by a group of civil rights activists and journalists, which provided regular daily updates of news, commentary, and a forum for public discourse. However, the impact of the Internet on the voting pattern was marginal. Firstly, the Internet was still new in the political arena. Secondly, the Internet was largely urban-based, and, hence, it was not easily accessible to the vast majority of the voters who live in the rural areas. There were about 9 million voters, but the total number of subscribers to Jaring or TM Net, the two major Internet service providers then, was only 650,000. Not all voters were linked to the Internet. The Internet was most popular with the younger generation, most of whom were not eligible to vote. Yet, the opposition forces campaigned on the cyberspace using websites and SMS. However, all opposition efforts pale into insignificance when compared with the BN media coverage. One election observation mission puts it as follows:

²⁴ Hilley, *Malaysia*, p. 263.

²⁵ Francis Loh Kok Wah and Mustafa K. Anuar (1996), 'The Press in Malaysia in the Early 1990s: Corporatisation, Technological Innovation and the Middle Class', in Muhammad Ikmal Said and Zahid Emby (eds.), *Critical Perspectives: Essays in Honour of Syed Husin Ali* (Petaling Jaya: Malaysian Social Science Association, 1996), pp. 96–131.

ANFREL observers were struck by the blatant bias seen both in the print and electronic media, in favour of the ruling coalition. Both Bahasa and English-language newspapers ran full-page ads, some of which used reworked or faked photos, aimed at showing the opposition in a bad light. As well, stories alleging corruption and sexual impropriety were widely circulated in the government-controlled press. Many of these newspapers refused to publish opposition advertisements, or run coverage of its campaign. Similarly, television advertisements and coverage were BN exclusive.²⁶

2004 Elections: a historic mandate to rule

The BA could not continue to work as a team and hence could not act as an effective opposition to the ruling coalition. In the 2004 elections, the BN received a historic ‘mandate to rule’ by winning 64.4% of the vote and 90.4% of the parliamentary seats.²⁷ One reason cited for the success of the BN is the personality of prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Abdullah has been in Malaysian politics since 1978, holding various positions including that of deputy prime minister, a post he was assigned after Anwar Ibrahim was sacked. However, his elevation to the post of prime minister in 2003 was a welcome departure from the ‘authoritarian’ style of leadership of Mahathir Mohamad. The soft-spoken Abdullah differed in style and substance from his fiery predecessor, Mahathir. He was dubbed by the media as ‘Mr Clean’ whose oft-repeated slogan was ‘Work with me, not for me’.²⁸ Abdullah’s personable manner was further augmented by his Islamic credentials. While not a religious leader in the strictest sense, Abdullah came from a family of Islamic scholars and was himself a graduate of Islamic studies. He was equally generous to non-Muslims, attended their functions, and greeted them on the occasion of their religious festivities and holidays. On assuming office, Abdullah tried to rein in the corrupt practices and patronage that had come to alienate mass Malay followings and foreign investors. He addressed the festering issue of graft with high-profile prosecutions. Eric Chia, a multimillionaire and a close associate of Mahathir Mohamad, was arrested and charged with criminal breach of trust amounting to RM 76.4 million (\$20.3 million) while he was head of Perwaja Steel Bhd. Land and cooperation minister, Kasitah Gaddam, was charged with corruption involving RM 3.6 million (\$900,000) and subsequently resigned from the post. Abdullah also rekindled some faith in the police through the establishment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the police force, which was under attack for its lack of transparency, excessive use of force, ill-treatment of suspects and detainees, and high levels of corruption. The commission consisted of members from the government, civil society, and opposition party representatives. Abdullah made anti-corruption a pillar of his

²⁶ ANFREL and FORUM-ASIA, *Malaysia: Report of the 1999 Election Observation Mission*, 25 November–1 December (Thailand: Asian Network for Free Elections ANFREL and Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development FORUM-ASIA, July 2000), p. 34.

²⁷ Moten and Mokhtar, ‘The 2004 General Elections in Malaysia’, pp. 319–340.

²⁸ P. Gunasegaran, ‘Abdullah Gave Us Back Our Voice’, *The Star*, 3 April 2009, p. 4.

administration. He worked to improve public delivery systems, cutting red tape and increasing efficiency in the public sector, applying prudent fiscal management by cancelling high-cost projects, and boosting the agricultural sector to create more sources of wealth. A survey conducted in July 2004 by the independent Merdeka Center for Opinion Research found that 42% of nationally representative quota sample of 1,017 adult respondents voted for BN because of its promise for material development. The survey also found that '32% of the respondents chose to describe [Abdullah] as a "man of the people" while 22% described him as having a "clean image". Another 19% saw him in the context of his religious background'.²⁹

The policies adopted by Abdullah Badawi relating to corruption, the plight of the poor and the like were the ones emphasized by the opposition. In other words, the opposition, in the wake of 2004 election, had no major platform to capitalize on its 1999 success. The PAS, therefore, decided to become more Islamic and released a blue print for an Islamic state in 2003 as its campaign platform. This alienated a large number of the non-Muslim electorate who were comfortable with the secular stand of the government. The opposition parties were also aggressive in their campaign and accused the BN government of abuses, injustices, and other issues. In contrast, Abdullah adopted a non-confrontational approach that was attuned to Malaysia's political culture. His appeal to the country had been 'trust me' rather than 'trust my government'. His campaign themes have been promises to curb corruption and to lead Malaysia toward 'Excellence, Glory, and Distinction'.³⁰ His religious credibility, seen as genuine by many, neutralized PAS's Islamic slogans and Anwar's carefully cultivated image as a modern Muslim leader. Consequently, the Malaysian electorate jettisoned the opposition, giving the BN an unprecedented victory in the 2004 elections.

BN's win in the election was also partly attributable to the buoyant Malaysian economy, which has recorded impressive growth since 1999. In 2003, the economy performed surprisingly well despite the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in the middle of the year. Inflation remained relatively low at 1.2% and the unemployment rate stood at about 3.8%. The manufacturing sector registered the strongest growth at 6.5%, followed by mining (4.5%) and services (4.2%).³¹ Prime minister Abdullah has continued most of his predecessor's economic policies. One obvious divergence was Abdullah's plan to improve the agricultural sector as one of the engines of economic growth. In a small cabinet reshuffle after becoming prime minister, Abdullah, retaining the portfolio of finance, appointed Nor Muhammad Yaakob, then economic advisor to the government, as his second finance minister. Nor Yaakob was credited for implementing unorthodox economic policies such as currency and capital controls as responses to the Asian financial crisis that hit Malaysia

²⁹ Pauline Puah, 'Survey Confirms "Pak Lah Factor" in BN Polls Victory', *Malaysiakini*, 18 September 2004, available at <http://www.malaysiakini.com> (accessed 19 September 2007).

³⁰ Moten and Mokhtar, 'The 2004 General Elections in Malaysia', pp. 326–328.

³¹ 'Budget Building on Success, Investing for the Future', available at <http://www.nst.com.my/CurrentNews/NST/Saturday/Columns/200309130952/Artic> (accessed 18 March 2004).

in 1997–98. Several economic indicators worked in the government's favour. On 25 February 2004, Bank Negara (the central bank) announced Malaysia's economic performance for 2003 in which the gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 5.2%, better than the government's initial forecast of 4.5%. The BN campaigned heavily on economic issues. The government promised more assistance for farmers. An advertising campaign stressed the low cost of food and petrol. The almost total domination of the broadcast and daily print media also helped in mobilizing the public to vote for the ruling coalition. The media packaged and projected the image of a sincere and warmer Abdullah (known as Pak Lah) and a caring and concerned Barisan Nasional, while dismissing the opposition leaders as insincere and incapable of fulfilling the needs of the Malaysian public. The media systematically projected the PAS as being discriminatory toward women, fixated with segregation of the sexes, and desirous of curbing so-called un-Islamic forms of dress and entertainment. During the eight-day campaign, the BN bombarded the electorate with approximately 1,000 pages of full-page advertisements. In contrast, newspapers refused to run all but a few of the opposition advertisements, and, even then, these were heavily edited. In contrast, the opposition relied upon their own mouthpieces with limited circulation. The year 2004 saw the rapid rise of bloggers and websites by non-government organizations such as Aliran Online (*Aliran.com*), Suaram (*Suara Rakyat Malaysia* or Voice of the Malaysian People) with its *Suaram.net*, women advocates Tenaganita (*www.tenaganita.net*), and others. There were also socio-political bloggers like Jeff Ooi (*www.jeffooi.com*) and journalist Oon Yeoh (*oonyeoh.blogspot.com*) who pursued cyber activism. According to a rough count, there were more than 7,500 blogs and websites compared to some 50 bloggers in 1998/1999. Their activities did not help the opposition much. The Merdeka Center survey found that nearly two-thirds of 1,017 respondents viewed media coverage during the elections as being biased in favour of the ruling party. Forty-five percent of respondents reported that they were influenced by the mass media.³²

2008 elections: reversing the 2004 trend

Abdullah Badawi who led the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) to its greatest victory in 2004 led the same coalition to its worst electoral performance in 2008. This dramatic shift in voting trend has been attributed to the lacklustre performance of the prime minister in office, which raised popular discontent to levels seen during the *reformasi* movement in 1998.³³ The result of the 2008 elections, according to Abdullah Badawi 'was a strong message that I have not moved fast enough in pushing through with the reforms that I had promised to undertake'.³⁴ Abdullah did follow through, to some extent, on his anticorruption campaign pledges and launched a National Institute for

³² Pauline Puah, 'Survey: Media Coverage of Elections Slanted', available at <http://www.malaysiakini.com> (accessed 21 September 2004).

³³ Abdul Rashid Moten, '2008 General Elections in Malaysia: Democracy at Work', *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 10:1 (2009), 38–40.

³⁴ 'BN's Biggest Mistake: Ignoring the Internet', *The Straits Times*, 26 March 2008, p. 14.

Ethics and a National Integrity Plan in 2004. One minister, found guilty of buying votes in UMNO's party elections in 2004, was forced to resign in October 2005. Progress has been slow in subsequent years, however. In 2006, the prime minister's efforts were undermined by police resistance to establish an independent police complaints and misconduct board. In the cabinet reshuffle in February 2006, the most controversial ministers retained their positions. During the three years of Abdullah's administration, there were a number of corruption scandals including the billion-dollar fraud at the Port Klang Free Trade Zone and the outrageous and much-flaunted wealth of a ruling party member of the Selangor State Assembly who built a palatial mansion for himself without the requisite municipal approval. There were also claims that a High Court judge allowed the lawyer representing a rich businessman to write for him his judgement in a defamation lawsuit. Then there was the highly publicized case of the murder of a Mongolian model which implicated politicians and a minister. These scandals did not receive decisive responses from the prime minister.

There were also complaints about one-sided rules and practices in the conduct of elections that favoured the ruling BN, the short campaigning period that disadvantaged the opposition, the delimitation (review and recommendation) of constituencies that allegedly benefited the ruling party, and the phantom (unqualified) and postal voters casting ballots in favour of the BN. Though the Election Commission's conduct of elections, as observed by the authors in several polling centres, has been generally satisfactory, it has been accused of being biased, serving the interests of the ruling coalition. Consequently, 26 NGOs and five opposition political parties formed a coalition for Clean and Fair Election, known as BERSIH, which organized a demonstration on 23 November 2007, demanding an immediate reform on at least three issues, i.e. the use of indelible ink, the abolition of postal voting, and the cleansing of the electoral roll. The government's response was lukewarm. The use of indelible ink to prevent multiple voting was agreed to, but at the last minute the Election Commission decided not to use it till a provision to that effect was inserted in the Constitution through amendment.

Abdullah has also been seen as weak on freedom of religion issues, disappointing those who once saw him as a 'moderate' leader. A significant segment of the Hindu Indian minority were unhappy about a series of court cases pertaining to consequences emanating from Hindu conversions to Islam, the custody of children, the religious identity of deceased persons, and so on. The demolition of Hindu temples, purportedly for illegal construction, had also incensed the community. Thousands of Malaysian Indians led by the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) held a rally on 25 November 2007, demanding protection of their rights. They were chased away by the police. Five of their leaders were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act and another 30 were charged with the attempted murder of a policeman. This damaged Abdullah's popularity and the credibility of the BN government. M. Manoharan, one of five jailed activists, was elected to the State Assembly of Selangor while in prison. Conversely, almost all the Indian leaders contesting from the BN platform lost their seats.

The credibility gap of Abdullah's administration was compounded by sharp divisions within the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Immediately after the 2004 election, the UMNO was seriously afflicted by factional fights. Mahathir Mohamad, the former President of the UMNO, has resorted to a wide-ranging campaign to discredit and depose Abdullah. He accused Abdullah of undermining his legacy and failing to live up to campaign promises. Mahathir not merely refrained from campaigning for the ruling coalition but even advised the voters to elect a good number of opposition candidates to keep the government in check. There were also reports, as in Perlis, of parliamentary members not on good terms with the chief minister. The supporters of the incumbent Perlis chief minister resigned enmasse, locking up operations rooms and refusing to campaign for the party. There were other noticeable rifts in the party, which led the UMNO Supreme Council to postpone internal party elections, scheduled for 2007, until after the national general elections.

Factionalism in the party was compounded by Abdullah's attempt to strengthen his base within the party by replacing established and popular veterans with loyal new candidates in the election. These misjudgements provoked a revolt within the UMNO. There were reports of UMNO members themselves sabotaging campaign machineries in various states. Open disagreement over the party's candidate list broke out in Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis, Kedah, and Perak. In Kelantan, a day before the nominations, two UMNO candidates withdrew from the parliamentary seats, which were quickly replaced by unknown figures. The post-election analysis by the UMNO revealed that UMNO members sabotaged the electoral process in 14 parliamentary and 22 state constituencies in Perak and Kedah during the March general election. According to Abdullah, 'the act of sabotage has already taken place. If not for it, we would not have lost the two-thirds majority and two state governments ... This is truly regrettable.'³⁵

Other BN component parties were equally suffering from factionalism. The MCA was weakened by internal strife with various factions fighting for influence and positions. The MCA president Ong Ka Ting dropped his key rivals, including former health minister Chua Jui Meng, who challenged Ong for the Party presidency in 2005. The health minister, Chua Soi Lek, resigned from office in January 2008 over a sex scandal. Publication of a videotape of the episode was widely believed to have been made by Chua Soi Lek's rivals within the MCA. The Vice President of MCA also declined to contest in the election. The MCA had earlier adopted what is known as the 'rejuvenation strategy' in pursuance of which a number of reliable and productive candidates were dropped because they had served three terms. Fifty-eight of the party's 130 candidates were new. Some of the candidates dropped from the race worked for their rivals while others simply did not vote for their own party. The MIC is widely seen as unable to live up to its primary ideal of safeguarding the interests of the Indian community. The party was torn between various factions, one of which was

³⁵ Cited in Moten, '2008 General Elections in Malaysia', p. 38.

led by its President Samy Velu and the other by former Deputy President of the party, S. Subramaniam. The BN itself was riven with a variety of different struggles. While the UMNO dominated the cabinet and policy decisions, the MCA, MIC, and Gerakan have been unable to have much impact in the wake of adverse court decisions concerning the rights of non-Malays. The general feeling extended across middle-class professionals that the BN has deviated from the policy of power sharing needed for governing a plural society such as Malaysia.

The grievances against the BN were very well articulated by charismatic Anwar Ibrahim who presented himself as a Malaysian leader fighting for equality, justice, and fairness for all Malaysian races. To capitalize on public disillusionment, Anwar Ibrahim formed two separate alliances with the DAP and the PAS because of their different ideological foundations. The three parties agreed not to contest against each other so as to present a united opposition front to the BN. The seat negotiations were difficult but ultimately successful in peninsular Malaysia. Anwar allowed the DAP and PAS to contest in their respective strongholds. The PKR settled for a few safe seats and many seats not coveted by the DAP and PAS. The PKR nominated candidates for 271 generally mixed constituencies composed of Malay, Chinese, and Indians. To make up for its organizational deficiencies, Anwar brought in Party Sosialis Malaysia (Socialist Party of Malaysia) and other civil societies under its banner.

Indeed, the combined opposition in 2008 was a more formidable force than the earlier opposition coalition in 1999 and 2004. This is for several reasons. Firstly, the coalition in 1999 was led by the PAS, which was not liked by non-Malay voters. In 2008, it was led by the PKR and, particularly, by Anwar Ibrahim who projected himself as a leader for all cultures and all races. Secondly, in the two previous elections most non-Malay voters voted for the ruling coalition, as they perceived the *reformasi* to be a movement to strengthen the position of Malays who are Muslims. Anwar was then a leader of Muslim Malays who was not much trusted by non-Malay voters. In 2008, Anwar introduced the New Economic Agenda replacing the New Economic Policy, which enriched UMNO leaders. This gained him the support of non-Malay, especially the Chinese, voters. He also endorsed the struggles of the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), thus winning the support of the Indian minority. Thirdly, unlike other leaders, Anwar was not confined to a particular constituency since he was legally barred from contesting until April 2008. He campaigned throughout the country addressing joint PKR–DAP and PKR–PAS *ceramahs* (small rallies and gatherings). A gifted speaker, Anwar was able to convince the Malay and non-Malay voters to vote as a strong opposition to the BN government, which was depicted as inefficient and arrogant. A Malaysian social rights activist rightly pointed out, ‘there has never been an instance in Malaysian politics when a single individual has made such a significant difference to the electoral landscape of the nation’.³⁶

³⁶ Chandra Muzaffar, ‘The Polls and the BN Debacle’, *The Star*, 17 March 2008, p. 12.

The problems for the BN and Abdullah Badawi were compounded by developments on the economic front. In an effort to cut government subsidies, fuel prices were significantly increased first by 20 cents in 2005 and a second time by 90 cents in 2006, sparking tremendous public resistance and a series of protests in March 2006. In his four years in office, however, Abdullah has managed to maintain economic growth at 6%, underpinned by strong export prices for commodities such as palm oil and crude oil. However, the benefits of the strong economy have accrued to a small political elite to the neglect of the ordinary citizens. Many ethnic Chinese and Indians blame this lop-sided development upon the government's affirmative action program, known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), which has given Malays preference in jobs, education, business, housing, finance, and religion since 1971. The *Ninth Malaysia Plan* (9MP), launched in 2006, aimed, amongst other things, to meet the 30% target for the bumiputera corporate equity share, a primary justification for the NEP's continued affirmative-action policies.³⁷ According to the 9MP, the bumiputera owned only 18.9% of corporate equity. This figure was contested by others sparking tremendous national debate over the policy and assessment of ethnic wealth. Fearing the incitement of racial tensions, deputy prime minister Najib Razak ordered an end to the discussion altogether. Opposition leaders, including Anwar as well as a growing number of Malays, have called for the abolition of racial preferences in recent years, arguing that they benefit only a small elite and do not really improve the economic condition of ordinary Malays. The Merdeka Center conducted a survey with 1,026 randomly selected registered voters in Peninsular Malaysia in December 2007 to gauge public sentiment. The survey results showed that about 70% of Malaysians were concerned about price hikes and the rising cost of living, 60% about crime and public safety, and 63% about ethnic inequality in society. They were also unhappy with the rising incidence of corruption and the government's management of the economy. Confidence in the government in running the economy was very low among the Chinese and Indians. Noticeably, in 2008, the BN did not win a single seat in constituencies, which comprised more than 70% Chinese voters. The survey also showed that the approval rating of the prime minister had decreased from 91% in 2005 to 61% in 2007. Abdullah's popularity suffered with the increases in petrol prices, and dipped significantly after the BERSIH and HINDRAF demonstrations.³⁸

The opposition parties carried out their campaign through various media outlets. In 1999, major newspapers and television stations did not give coverage to the opposition news. Nevertheless, under Abdullah Badawi's four-year rule and especially during the campaign period the opposition did receive a good amount of media space. A content analysis of eight newspapers, the radio and television, conducted by the authors under

³⁷ See Malaysia (2006), *Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006–2010* (Putrajaya: The Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, 2006), p. 347.

³⁸ Merdeka Center, 'Voter Opinion Poll 4th Quarter 2007', available at <http://www.merdekacenter.uni.cc/download/National> (accessed 18 March 2008).

the Electoral Studies Unit of the International Islamic University Malaysia, showed that the space allotted to opposition parties ranged between 20% and 35% during the 13-day campaign period. The major English daily, the *New Straits Times*, gave up to 26% of impartial coverage to opposition parties. Another English daily, *The Star*, provided about 9% coverage, while the Malay language newspaper, *Utusan Malaysia*, gave about 5% space to the opposition. The English language dailies also provided coverage to the civil societies aligned to various opposition parties.

Still, the opposition parties were disadvantaged and hence they campaigned on cyberspace using new technologies such as blogs, SMS, and YouTube. With a population of around 27.1 million in 2007, Malaysia had nearly 14 million Internet users. There has been a proliferation of independent websites and blogs such as *Malaysia Today* and *Malaysiakini*, which publicized institutional corruption and other issues, particularly in the judiciary. Malaysiakini was set up in 1999 as Malaysia's first commercial Internet newspaper. The site, in 2007, averaged 120,000 visitors a day, of which approximately 80% were from within Malaysia, which compares respectably with the circulation of mainstream newspapers such as the *New Straits Times*. The opposition parties made good use of this vibrant alternative media on the Internet. They nominated bona-fide bloggers who campaigned online, raised funds through their websites, and won against the ruling party candidates; bloggers Jeff Ooi won Penang's Jelutong seat, Tony Pua for PJ Utara, Nik Nazmi for Seri Setia, and Elizabeth Wong for Bukit Lanjan in Selangor. The DAP chairman, Lim Kit Siang, ran three blogs which were meticulously updated with multiple posts every day, and many of the party's other leaders followed his example. The PAS ran its own online journal *HarakahDaily.net*, which featured six different online television channels and provided original reporting on the election. Anwar Ibrahim wrote his own blog with news links and videos of his party's campaign activities. Anwar used the site to release a video clip, in 1997, showing a high-profile lawyer brokering top judicial appointments, which led to the appointment of a royal commission of inquiry. Through this alternative media, the opposition highlighted Malaysia's rising crime rate, consumer-price inflation, and government corruption urging the voters to deny the BN the two-thirds majority it desired. Opposition candidates also used the Internet to solicit funds for their election campaigns. The DAP's Tony Pua stated that 'Previously, we obtained funds through conventional means such as *ceramah* (public gathering) and dinners . . . The Internet is now another important channel which has helped us tremendously to get more funds.' Pua collected more than RM10,000 via credit card and online transfers.³⁹

The BN unveiled its campaign site, <http://bn2008.org.my> along with its manifesto. However, it was half-hearted and suffered from legitimacy crisis. The BN did not take alternative media seriously and relied extensively on newspapers, the print media, and the television. As Abdullah Badawi regretted, 'We did not think it was important. It was

³⁹ E.Ng, 'Opposition using Internet to raise funds', *New Straits Times*, 3 March 2008, p. 17.

a serious misjudgment.⁴⁰ The survey by Zentrum Future Studies Malaysia, conducted from 20 February to 5 March 2008 and involving 1,500 respondents, showed that the alternative media had a big influence on voters. The survey found about 65% of the respondents trusted blogs and online media for reliable information as against 23% who relied on the television and about 15% on newspapers.⁴¹ The opposition parties used this alternative media to reach the electorate, set aside their ideological differences, posed a united challenge to the ruling coalition, and achieved a stunning electoral victory, which, to many political analysts, was impossible given the entrenched power of the ruling BN.

GE 13 and secular dealignment

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Anwar Ibrahim claimed: 'I don't think Malaysian politics will ever be the same again.'⁴² Controlling the five states and the metropolitan areas gave the opposition an effective control over 45% of the economy in terms of gross domestic product. Consequently, the *de facto* leader of the opposition, Anwar Ibrahim, demanded recognition as the 'alternative government' or 'government in the waiting'. To justify its demand, the three opposition parties cemented their alliance and called themselves Pakatan Rakyat, PR or People's Alliance on 1 April 2008.

On 26 August 2008, Anwar Ibrahim contested and won the by-election and returned to the Dewan Negara after an absence of about ten years. Soon Anwar Ibrahim took his place in parliament as leader of the opposition and reiterated his determination to put an end to the BN's 51-year uninterrupted rule. Abdullah Badawi, weakened by the BN's poor performance in the election and other problems, handed over power to his deputy, Najib Tun Razak, on 3 April 2009. In his maiden speech aired over national television, he told Malaysians that the government would adopt 'new approaches for new times'. 'We must reach out to all parts of Malaysia . . . to all our diverse communities. In our national discourse and in pursuing our national agenda, we must never leave anyone behind.'⁴³ He projected himself as a champion of multi-racial Malaysia, emphasizing ethnic harmony, national unity, and efficient government. Near the end of the parliamentary term of five years, the prime minister called for a fresh mandate.

Malaysians went to the polls for the country's thirteenth general election on 5 May 2013. This election perhaps reinforces the 'secular dealignment' pattern observed in the aftermath of 2004 election. A total of 579 candidates contested the 222 seats in the Dewan Rakyat (the lower house). The ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, nominated 221 candidates. For the state assemblies, there were 1,320 candidates with the ruling coalition nominating 505 candidates and the rest came from various opposition parties and independent candidates. There were a large number of independent candidates:

⁴⁰ 'Internet served a painful lesson', *New Straits Times*, 26 March 2008, p. 2.

⁴¹ Cited in Moten, '2008 General Elections in Malaysia', p. 39.

⁴² Thomas Fuller, 'Malaysia's Ruling Coalition Suffers Setback', *The New York Times*, 9 March 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/world/asia/09malaysia.html?hp> (accessed 20 April 2008).

⁴³ *New Straits Times*, 4 April 2008.

79 for parliamentary constituencies and 191 for state assembly seats as compared to the 12th General Election in 2008 with 37 parliamentary and 66 state assembly independent candidates. The huge number of contestants speaks of Malaysia's heightened political involvement.

Campaigning in the form of *ceramah* (talk, public lecture usually indoor), social and religious events, and gatherings have been going on since the 2008 election. The opposition group has organized political gatherings over the years to mount an effective challenge to the BN and indeed the ruling coalition retaliated with its own gatherings. In this election, social media played a prominent role. The prime minister declared, a month before the polls, that the general election will be Malaysia's first 'social media election'.⁴⁴ It is worth noting that Malaysia has experienced an increase in total Internet penetration from 1,718,500 in 2008 to 5,839,600 in 2012. Parties and candidates from the two coalitions as well as some smaller parties struggled hard to ensure that their messages and propaganda made their way to as many Malaysians as possible. They used blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and twitter to reach specially the younger generation who are very good in using this type of media.

A host of issues raised in 2008 elections was repeated by a confident opposition alliance, PR. These issues include: government's misuse of power and authority, draining of financial resources, increase in corruption and cost of living, discriminatory policies within the framework of its multi-racial population, and the like. The opposition constantly exposed corruption scandals in government. It has shown since 2008 that it is capable of administering the four state governments it controlled competently despite reduced federal funds for some projects. By so doing, the PR broadened its appeal among voters and presented itself as the available alternative to the BN government. The PR election manifesto, issued on 25 February 2013, 'The People's Pact, The People's Hope', promises, among others, free basic healthcare, abolition of all legislation that restricts media freedom, to apologize to all Internal Security Act detainees from the past to the present, to build 150,000 affordable homes in the low-cost category, reallocate human resources to increase the size of the Criminal Investigation Department by reducing the General Operations Force, to bear tertiary education fees and subsidize fees in private institutions.⁴⁵

The Barisan Nasional (BN) has cleverly shielded itself against consistent attacks by the PR component parties through its transformation programs and the 1Malaysia concept to promote faster economic growth and to distribute resources equally among its multi-racial population. Najib also announced his flagship policy, the \$444 billion Economic Transformation Program (ETP) in 2010. In the short term, Barisan Nasional distributed cash money and other favors to particular groups of constituents. Some of the spending is related to prime minister Najib's signature program, '1Malaysia,

⁴⁴ 'Najib: GE13 will be first social media polls', *The Star*, Thursday, 28 February 2013, p. 4.

⁴⁵ PKR, DAP, PAS, 'Manifesto Rakyat: Pakatan Harapan Rakyat' (People's Manifesto: Pact, People's Hope) (n.p., 2013).

People First and Performance Now'. It aims at promoting good governance, national identity, and ethnic harmony. The 2013 budget unveiled on 29 September 2012 was dubbed by many observers as the election budget. It allocated amounts targeting special sections of the Malaysian population. Najib's economic policies were accompanied by bold initiatives in the political sphere. These included repealing the infamous Internal Security Act (ISA), revoking three emergency proclamations, and reviewing the Restricted Residence Act. He also dealt firmly with the incursion on 11 February 2013 by heavily armed Filipino militants in a coastal village in Lahad Datu, Sabah. This is the most serious security crisis to hit Malaysia in decades. Malaysians have reacted favorably to the government's tough military response to the rebel incursion.

The thirteenth election was very closely and bitterly fought. The turnout rate of 84.84% for the parliamentary and 85.82% for state legislative assembly seats evidence the democratic awakening of the Malaysians. Malaysian political culture has changed and the rate of Malaysian political participation has increased.

The election results (see table 4) show the operation of a two-coalition system. In the elections, the BN has regained power in one state and won a majority of seats in the Dewan Rakyat. It failed, however, to obtain the much desired two-thirds majority in the parliament. In fact, its share of state and parliamentary seats has been substantially reduced and it lost the popular vote count nationwide by a substantial margin. For the Pakatan, although they had their best result ever in winning the popular vote and the seats at federal and state levels, they could not succeed in replacing the BN. The PR has been beset by major problems of cohesion posed by conflicting ideologies and interests. It is also worth noting that parties outside the two alliances failed to win a single seat with the exception of STAR, which won a state seat in East Malaysia. All the independent candidates lost miserably. Continuation of this trend will contribute immensely to the maturing of the two-coalition system in Malaysia.

Predictably, the leader of Pakatan Rakyat, Anwar Ibrahim, has blamed electoral fraud and irregularities as factors contributing to its failure to wrestle power from the BN. The EC and poll observers denied these allegations. Poll observers, however, considered the election to be free but not fair. Overall, the election results did not make either of the coalitions to be ecstatic but they could console themselves that they did partly well. The two will check each other to promote good governance. The GE 13, in short, displayed all the characteristics associated with secular dealignment.

Conclusion

The partisan identification thesis in the case of Malaysia has significantly been dented by the results of the general elections held in 1999, 2004, and March 2008. The substance and relative success of the opposition can be traced to the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim, then the deputy prime minister, from all government positions and his expulsion from the UMNO in 1998. Anwar's dismissal and subsequent jailing sparked unprecedented anti-government protests and demonstrations, known as the *reformasi* (reform) movement that led to the formation of the KeADILan and the emergence of

Table 4. Results of 2013 general elections at parliamentary and state levels

Party	Parliament			Percent votes	State seats		
	Contested	Won	Percent seats won		Contested	Won	Percent state seats won
BN	221	133	59.91	46.57	505	275	54.46
PAS	73	21	9.46		236	85	
PKR	99	30	13.51		172	49	
DAP	51	38	17.12		103	95	
PR Total	223	89	40.09	50.39	511	229	45.35
STAR	28				49	1	0.20
SAPP	8				41		
BERJASA	9				5		
KITA	2				11		
BERSAMA	1				4		
PCM	2				3		
PSM	0				2		
SWP	6				0		
Independent	79				191		
Total others	135			1.52	306	1	0.20

Note: BN=Barisan Nasional or National Front; PAS=Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or the Islamic Party of Malaysia; PKR=Parti Keadilan Rakyat or People's Justice Party; PR=Pakatan Rakyat or People's Pact; DAP=Democratic Action Party; STAR=Parti Reformasi Negeri or State Reform Party; SAPP=Parti Maju Sabah or Sabah Progressive Party; Berjasa=Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia or Pan Malaysian Islamic Front; KITA=Parti Kesejahteraan Insan Tanah Air or Malaysian People's Welfare Party; BERSAMA=Parti Bersatu Sasa Malaysia; PCM=Part Cinta Malaysia or Love Malaysia Party; PSM=Parti Socialis Malaysia or Socialist Party of Malaysia; SWP=Sarawak Workers Party.

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia, 'General Elections Information Management System', at http://resultpru13.spr.gov.my/module/keputusan/paparan/5_KerusiDun.php (accessed 9 May 2013).

the four-party alliance known as the *Barisan Alternatif* (BA). A good portion of the electorate shifted their allegiance from the BN to the opposition BA but it failed to unseat the government in 1999. The subsequent split in the opposition in 2001 over the issue of Islamic governance/secular state weakened the opposition as a whole. The emergence of Abdullah Badawi with an amiable personality and a reform agenda led the electorate to desert the 'splintered' opposition and vote overwhelmingly for the BN in 2004. This apparently is an example of secular dealignment in reverse. It is to the credit of Anwar Ibrahim that in the 2008 elections, he forged 'loose unity' among the Islamic PAS, the secular DAP, and the multi-ethnic PKR. Indeed, the combined

opposition in 2008 was a more formidable force than the earlier opposition coalition in 1999 and 2004.

Evidently, the 1999, 2004, and 2008 elections are termed 'secular dealignment' in that the beneficiary of the previous elections lost substantially to the competing coalition. In 1999, the BA made substantial gains though it could not unseat the BN. In 2004, the BN not merely re-gained the lost votes but added substantial new votes to get the historic mandate. In the 2008 election, the BN lost its two-thirds majority in the parliament, giving rise to a powerful opposition.

The three elections, and in particular the March 2008 elections, show that the electoral behaviour of a substantial segment of the Malaysian electorate is influenced more by issues and party leadership than by party identification. This secular dealignment in all the three cases can be attributed to similar factors: disaffection with the leadership of the government, the poor performance of the economy, the use of intensive mass media, and availability of the alternative platform for the electorate to choose from. These forces were in operation more intensely in 2008 than in the previous two elections. The opposition formed government in five states but the BN succeeded in forming the government at the federal level in 2008.

That there has been a change in the behaviour of the Malaysian electorate is clear. Some observers of Malaysian politics attribute this behavioural change to Badawi's failure to tackle corruption, crime, and inflation. Others consider it a genuine revolt against race-based politics. Francis Loh Kok Wah wrote in 2003 about 'the increasing fragmentation of the ethnic communities' and the emergence of 'new politics' which transcended ethnicity sparked by the Anwar-initiated *reformasi* movement of 1998.⁴⁶ The 2008 March elections and subsequent by-election results may be seen as the extension of the new idiom of politics. The hegemony of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has become increasingly fragile. The opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, adopted the idiom of new politics and appealed equally to all ethnic groups in the country. Their election manifestos were anchored on racial equality and egalitarianism. Its *de facto* leader, Anwar Ibrahim, declared categorically that 'We will not talk about Malay supremacy but the supremacy of all Malaysians.'⁴⁷ Anwar has presented himself as a defender of non-Malay rights when he demolished the need for the continuance of Malay affirmative rights. The state government of Perak allocated state land to nine independent Chinese schools, while the DAP chief minister of Penang has pledged to set up state-funded Islamic religious schools.⁴⁸ For its part, the new government under Najib has legislated policies undermining race-based politics. Thus,

⁴⁶ Francis Loh Kok Wah, 'Towards a New Politics of Fragmentation and Contestation', in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Johan Saravanamuttu (eds.), *New Politics in Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), p. 279.

⁴⁷ Areen Mazlan, 'Kampung Baru hails "Ketuanan Rakyat"', *Malaysiakini*, 15 April 2008, available at <http://www.Malaysiakini.com> (accessed 23 June 2008).

⁴⁸ Mohd Sabri Said, 'Guan Eng Umum Tubuh SAR, Kembalikan Bantuan Per Kapita', *Harakah Daily*, 6 September 2008, available at www.harakhdaily.net (accessed 27 June 2008).

both the government and the parties in opposition are beginning to see the merit of addressing religious or racial issues as an across-the-board responsibility. It is possible, therefore, to suggest that in the aftermath of the 2008 elections, Malaysia is gradually moving towards multi-culturalism. The 2008 elections also witnessed an assertive role played by various non-governmental organizations and other civil and political forces in society. The Malaysian non-governmental and civil societies, laced with 'new media', braved various obstacles and persevered in asserting their role. The rank and file of civil societies acted as candidates, campaign workers, and election monitors for the opposition coalition. The contesting parties and affiliated civil societies made greater use of the Internet to express their dissenting views with the ruling coalition. Internet sites have increased significantly and the number of hits on the most popular ones have been tremendous. The opposition had a unified platform of multi-racialism, social justice, democracy, and more equitable development, as well as a cooperative strategy. The voice of the opposition was more strident and more assertive than in 1999 and 2004. The trend found in 2008 emerged much more vigorously in the 2013 elections with the government losing more seats to the combined opposition. The emergence of a strong opposition could help institutionalize the idea of checks and balances in a democratic framework, and would render it difficult for the ruling coalition to opt for repressive policies.

About the authors

Abdul Rashid Moten is Professor of Political Science at the International Islamic University Malaysia. He earned his BA (Hons) and MA from Dhaka University Bangladesh, MA from Villanova University, Pennsylvania, USA, and Ph.D. from the University of Alberta, Canada. He has been lecturing at many universities (Bangladesh, Pakistan, UK, USA, Canada, Nigeria, and Malaysia) for about 40 years. He served as an advisor to Marshal Cavendish International (Singapore) and is on the Research Board of Advisors to the American Biographic Institute. He is the recipient of many awards including IIUM Best Research Award, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2007. He specializes in Comparative Politics, Methodology, Islamic Political Thought and Institutions, and Electoral Studies. He has authored and edited 28 books and monographs and contributed over 100 articles in internationally refereed journals. His latest edited book is *Government and Politics in Malaysia* (Cengage Learning, 2013). He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Intellectual Discourse*, the flag-ship journal of the International Islamic University Malaysia. He is also the editor of the *International Journal of Islamic Thoughts*, Dhaka, Bangladesh.