Malaysia: Governing coalition weakened by losses in regions

BY FRANCIS LOH

ALTHOUGH MALAYSIAN PRIME
Minister Abdullah Badawi’s National Front government was re-elected in March 2008, it fell short of a two-thirds’ majority in parliament. With only 140 of the 220 seats, it can no longer amend the Constitution at will.

The National Front was also ousted in five out of thirteen state legislatures. They include the three most industrialized states in the Peninsula, as well as the poorest two states in the north. Changes to Malaysia’s centralized federalism might be in the offing.

The ruling coalition is led by a Malay party and also includes Chinese-Malaysian and Indian-Malaysian parties, reflecting Malaysia’s diversity. The coalition was formed following the 1969 election and related race riots.

In 1990 and in 1995, there were concerted efforts to break the coalition’s stranglehold on Parliament. Both attempts failed due to insufficient Malay support in the first instance and inadequate non-Malay support in the second.

The coalition used to be able to count on its component parties to mobilize cross-ethnic communities to win, especially in mixed constituencies, but no longer.

Voters switch
All this changed in the March elections. A solid swing among Indian-Malaysian voters, traditionally pro-coalition, was accompanied by an equally pronounced switch of Chinese-Malaysian voters to the opposition. This dovetailed with Malays rallying behind the opposition People’s Justice Party.

The People’s Justice Party campaign was led by the charismatic Anwar Ibrahim, previously deputy Prime Minister. He returned to politics after more than two years’ incarceration on trumped-up charges of sodomy and abuse of powers. Under Mr. Ibrahim, the opposition party moved to the centre and forged electoral pacts with the Islamic Party of Malaya and the largely non-Malay Muslim Democratic Action Party.

The upshot was a surprising swing away from the National Front coalition in favour of a loose and informal coalition among the three opposition parties.

Dr. Jeyakumar Devaraj, of the People’s Justice Party, said that “when we began our campaign, we were not hopeful of a victory.”

“To our surprise we won on election night,” said Devaraj, who defeated Samy Vellu, a member of the Indian-Malaysian party in the National Front coalition. Malaysia’s Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (right) celebrates his re-election with his deputy Najib Razak in Kuala Lumpur on March 9, 2008. Malaysia’s ruling party suffered its worst ever electoral losses as the opposition won five of 13 state elections.

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Demands for accountability
There is still concern about the adequacy of procedures for financial accountability given to regions and cities. Ex-finance minister Rudolf Hommes told the leading national newspaper, El Tiempo, in 2006: “Since the constitutional changes of 1991 – which gave local governments the power and responsibility to make autonomous decisions in the areas of education, health and basic services, while transferring national resources so that those local and regional governments could adequately fulfill those obligations … there was a prevailing sense that the control mechanisms to ensure that the mayors and governors would fulfill those constitutional responsibilities were lacking.”

But despite internal pressures, Colombia does not have the kind of territorial concentration of linguistic, ethnic or religious identities that could threaten to break the country apart. There are no strong minority groups to oppose the current unitary government structure, or to demand a federal system. Nevertheless, the centralized governance that prevailed since the late 19th century contributed significantly to the country’s many decades of internal conflicts.

Many pundits agree that since the early 1980s, Colombia has taken dramatic steps in the right direction. If the past 20 years is to serve as a roadmap for the future, Colombia needs to keep moving down the road in the direction of a more deeply decentralized structure, in which the interests, identities and demands of all inhabitants find meaningful expression at the national level.

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Empowering local governments to deliver better services leads to one important question: are the financial and human resource capabilities sufficient to meet the challenges that the country is facing? Morocco’s rapid urbanization is accompanied by an increasing need for municipal investment in the areas of infrastructure, sanitation, water and electricity services, transportation and urban development.

“The investment needed to meet increasing demand would require not only an increase in (its) own (internally generated) revenues, but improved ability to borrow and attract private investment,” said Mostapha El Haya, a member of the majority in the Casablanca City Council, in an interview with the Casablanca newspaper Al Masae on March 15. “It would also require stronger municipal human resources capability,” said Said Essaadi, an opposition member of the city’s council, in an interview with Al Masae on the same day.

Prospects for regional autonomy
With moves to amend the urban laws and to provide financial and human resources for cities and towns, municipal government reform is off to a good start in Morocco. The next area for the legislature to take on will most likely be regional government, a reform that might possibly begin in the unlikely location of Western Sahara.

However, any effort to accelerate decentralization or regional autonomy in Morocco through reforming decentralization laws will not be sufficient if accompanying measures are not implemented. Other legislation, such as the law governing political parties and the electoral law need to be reviewed to include more democratic practices and procedures inside political parties and to reduce corrupt practices during elections. Such a review should not only reduce vote buying and corruption during elections, but should also contribute to improved democratic and transparent procedures inside political parties, which would encourage more qualified candidates to run for municipal seats.

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and also the federal Public Works Minister, and one of four ministers topped in the election.

Indian-Malaysian anger at their economic and political marginalization had manifested itself in a massive demonstration in Kuala Lumpur last November, organized by a group calling itself the Hindu Rights Action Front.

Chinese-Malaysians were unhappy with the sluggish economy and the inability of the National Front government under Prime Minister Badawi to promote Malaysia’s competitiveness regionally.

They were also incensed by the actions of the Youth leader of the Malay party in the National Front who, brandishing an unsheathed double-edged Malayan dagger in his party’s assembly, had called for bringing back pro-Malay affirmative action policies.

There were also concerns about inflation caused by the hikes in fuel prices, rising crime rates, alleged corruption and abuses by National Front leaders in the local councils and state governments.

These urban issues perhaps explain why the more developed states of Penang, Selangor and Perak, as well as ten out of eleven seats in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur fell to the opposition.

In Penang, Lim Guan Eng, 47, the Democratic Action Party’s secretary-general, has been appointed the new chief minister. This most unlikely of chief ministers is now tasked with fostering harmonious relations with the National Front federal government that had detained him.

He has declared that he will review many of the “megaprojects” that the National Front state government had approved. In the state of Selangor, his counterpart from the People’s Justice Party is also reviewing the water privatization project of his National Front predecessor on grounds that the people and the state do not appear to be benefiting from the agreement signed.

For Malaysia to build upon the election outcome, and strengthen the federation, it is expected the federal government in Kuala Lumpur will curtail the coalition’s practice of encroaching on the powers of state governments.