

Malaysia: Governing coalition weakened by losses in regions



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.

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

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and also the federal Public Works Minister, and one of four ministers toppled 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. 