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No. 056/2013 dated 8 April 2013

Malaysia's Mother of All Elections: A Turning Point?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

This Malaysian general election will be the most critical battle for power between the ruling coalition and the opposition. Much is at stake: from the future of Malaysian politics to the future of two leaders – Prime Minister Najib Razak and opposition chief Anwar Ibrahim. What will GE13 lead to?

Commentary

MALAYSIA'S 13th general election will be the most crucial in decades: a titanic battle for the ruling Barisan Nasional to retain power and a referendum on the political future of two leaders. Once close allies in UMNO, Prime Minister Najib Razak and his challenger, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, a former UMNO deputy president and deputy prime minister, will clash directly for the first time in an electoral test of wills and skills.

Who between them will go on to lead the country, and who will be consigned to history will be known only after the 13th general election is fought and concluded in the coming weeks. Indeed, Najib is turning this into a referendum on his leadership, offering himself as the true visionary leader deserving of the people's mandate, and not Anwar nor the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) leader Hadi Awang.

The big question is whether GE13 will be conclusive, given the monumental fight ahead, and whether there will follow a period of uncertainty, if not instability, and what this will mean for Malaysia and the region. It is significant that on the day Parliament was dissolved on 3 April, both Najib and Anwar gave assurances of a smooth and peaceful transition of power regardless of the outcome.

Barisan or Pakatan?

Unlike previous general elections, it has been unusually difficult to predict with confidence the winner for this one, though most agree it will be very closely and bitterly fought, and the margin of victory wafer-thin. Various opinion polls have been projecting narrow wins by both sides. While most project a slim victory for BN, predictions of an opposition win have also surfaced. If Anwar's opposition alliance Pakatan Rakyat (PR) does win, he is most likely to be the new prime minister. This is not, however, as foregone a conclusion as it used to be, given the pockets of resistance to him in some circles within PR's component party PAS, and the shadow play by others that has rattled the opposition ranks.

At one point, an UMNO veteran and former opposition leader Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah was touted as a

possible prime minister in a PR-led government – in anticipation of an inconclusive outcome in which neither BN nor PR has sufficient majority to form a strong government. The idea of Razaleigh becoming an alternate candidate for PM should the opposition win has been immediately dismissed by PR leaders and denied by Razaleigh himself. It just goes to show how fluid things have become. The proposal was first floated by Razaleigh's own group of former office-bearers called Amanah.

If Anwar fails to unseat BN, he has declared that he will retire from politics. That will put an end to the political career of one of the most controversial yet charismatic and visionary leaders Malaysia has ever had. Anwar, however, has proven to possess the capacity to bounce back like the proverbial cat with nine lives.

Issue of Malay power

Najib, like the BN he leads, is under intense pressure to win. From Najib's perspective, at stake is the entire political system that has been built and steered by UMNO, the dominant party in BN. This system is premised on the centrality and dominance of Malay political power that is shared with the other communities through their ethnic-based parties in what former premier Mahathir Mohamed has lately called the "kongsi (sharing) concept."

As UMNO sees it, that Malay centrality is now under threat with the emergence of PR, which in the 2008 GE, denied BN its two-thirds majority for the first time. It also forced the exit of Najib's predecessor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Ironically, Anwar's three-party opposition alliance is dominated by two components that are preponderantly Malay and Muslim, with one that is Chinese-dominated. All three also claim to be plural parties, including, increasingly, the Islamist PAS.

The fundamental difference is that unlike UMNO, PR is not ideologically rooted to Malay hegemony, though political reality will force them to defend the dominance of Malay political power and Islam – in the latter case, especially so by PAS. Indeed, in a refrain seldom heard previously, Hadi Awang said recently that his party would not hesitate to quit PR should Islam and the Malays lose out from PAS' involvement in the coalition.

Najib's personal battle

For Najib, this battle is crucial personally. At stake is his reputation as son of the country's second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak who presided over the expansion of the ruling Alliance into BN. While BN cannot afford to lose, Najib cannot afford to even have BN fail to recapture its two-thirds majority. Besides, he must win back at least one of the four states lost to Pakatan, especially Selangor. Should he fail, Najib may be forced out as UMNO president and premier - just like Abdullah.

The delay in holding GE13 has worked against Najib, though he wants to be certain he can at least win back the two-thirds majority. According to the Malaysian Insider, intelligence assessments were sure of 135 seats for BN. This is 13 seats short of the 148 seats required to secure the two-thirds majority in the 222-seat parliament. BN, the Insider says, is however, confident of winning at least 145 seats. In other words, while winning back the two-thirds majority is a possibility, it is still not a certainty.

Future of coalition politics

Whichever way it turns out, GE13 will have major implications for the future of Malaysia's coalition politics. The political system has been so hegemonised by UMNO and BN that all previous attempts to form a rival coalition have failed miserably. Even so, the system has been evolving towards a two-coalition configuration.

PR is the latest rendition of this quest for a dual-coalition model. The alliance however has been beset by major problems of cohesion posed by conflicting ideologies and interests within, as well as obstacles strewn by the ruling BN coalition from without. PR however, has so far shown some resilience, with its strongest asset being Anwar's cementing and galvanising power.

If BN succeeds in diminishing the Anwar factor, the prospect of PR unravelling is real, though opposition leaders say they are prepared to stick together in a scenario without Anwar. If PR survives as an alternative coalition, thus giving a peaceful outlet for divergent political views, this will contribute to the maturing of the Malaysian political system.

If BN wins, even narrowly, one of its key challenges post-GE13 will be to develop a system that revolves around the battle of ideas and visions than one that determines national leadership via gutter politics. If BN loses, it could turn its unfamiliar role as opposition into advantage. If it can use that period to reinvent itself, BN could launch a strong comeback later - just like Japan's Liberal Democratic Party or Taiwan's Kuomintang and even Indonesia's Golkar.

But should GE13 prove inconclusive, all scenarios are possible - ranging from intense political bargaining to uncertainty, even instability. In such a state of flux, new power equations cannot be ruled out, making the future unpredictable to an unprecedented extent. No one, however, wants to see a replay of the racial riots of May 13 1969. The outcome of GE13 and its implications will bear a close watch.

Yang Razali Kassim is Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He is author of Transition Politics in Southeast Asia. This article first appeared in TODAY to kick-off a six-part series by RSIS commentators on the Malaysian general election.