

“A New Dawn for Malaysia”? The Aftermath of the 12th General Elections

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The 12th Malaysian general elections held on March 8, 2008 had been a relatively low-key affair, with most Malaysians resigned to victory by the ruling 14-party multi-ethnic Barisan Nasional coalition government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. However, as the results were announced that night, it steadily became apparent that the Barisan Nasional coalition had suffered its worst ever electoral performance. The ruling coalition secured just a simple majority of 140 seats, losing its three-decade old two-thirds supra-majority in the national parliament. The opposition--an informal alliance of the multi-racial PKR (*People's Justice Party*), Chinese based DAP (*Democratic Action Party*), and Malay Islamist based PAS (*Pan Malaysian Islamic Party*)--quadrupled its presence in parliament from the last election of 2004 from 20 to 82 seats. The Barisan Nasional coalition also incurred heavy losses at the state level, failing to wrestle control of the then only opposition controlled state of Kelantan, while losing control of the four industrialized and prosperous states of Penang, Kedah, Perak and Selangor to this informal opposition coalition.

Anwar Ibrahim, *de facto* leader of PKR and primary opposition leader, immediately declared “A new dawn for Malaysia,” where it could finally move beyond its entrenched race based dominated political system. Do these results signify a new dawn for Malaysia? Has ethnic politics been repudiated in Malaysia? How did the Barisan Nasional government lose so badly? How did the opposition achieve their historic political breakthrough? My paper argues that the results of the 12th Malaysian general

elections were unprecedented but not extraordinary. The results do not represent a fundamental realignment of a Malaysian political system institutionally apportioned on ethnic and racial lines, but rather were driven by significant shifts of these same entrenched ethnic political dynamics. Malaysia's transition to a more contested democratic politics will be tenuous as ethnic polarization will continue to shape the landscape of Malaysian politics. The historic victories of the opposition in much of industrialized and urbanized Malaysia, however, presents an opportunity to construct alternative multi-ethnic power sharing and governance models to the long standing Barisan Nasional models that have held sway since independence in 1957.

My discussion proceeds by setting out the political context of the 12th Malaysian general elections. I then highlight some significant results with an analysis of the dynamics of the campaign and show how concurrent political and social discontent brewing amongst all three of Malaysia's major ethnic communities contributed to a broad based swing against the government. Finally, I assess some future implications of Malaysia's altered political landscape for the Barisan Nasional government, the opposition, and for some of Malaysia's other important political institutions.

Political Context of the 12th Malaysian General Elections

As Malaysia approached its 12th general elections in 2008, the Barisan Nasional government could feel reasonably confident of another overwhelming electoral victory. It had accrued all the institutional and electoral advantages of a 51-year old incumbency. Control of all levers of power granted Barisan Nasional unlimited access to governmental discretionary funds to distribute as patronage or as inducements to both its firm and prospective supporters. The Barisan Nasional was also able to manipulate the ostensibly

independent electoral commission into drawing constituency boundaries to the advantage of the government. The electoral commission allocated more sparsely populated rural seats than more heavily populated urban seats, and delineated constituencies with more mixed ethnic populations, seats traditionally won by the coalition. The unlimited financial resources and institutional advantages of the coalition were also complemented by its control of almost all of Malaysia's print and broadcast media. Both the state media and the private media, owned by financial interests linked to component parties of the coalition, relentlessly pushed the message of the government while ignoring or vilifying opposition parties and their leaders.

Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi entered the 2008 elections in a strong political position as well. Abdullah had endeared himself to the Malaysian public with his low-key and affable leadership style. He had succeeded Malaysia's long time Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed (in 1981-2003) in October 2003 with an inordinate amount of political good will from the Malaysian public. His predecessor Mahathir bin Mohammed had changed the face of Malaysia's social and economic fabric forever, but his legacy still remains contentious in Malaysia today. Mahathir was a dynamic leader with a clear vision of how to modernize Malaysia. Mahathir, however, brokored no political dissent, and with his zero sum game leadership style, he provoked two major leadership crises in the ruling party of UMNO (1987-88, 1998-99) that led to wide-spread political crackdowns across the country, detaining opposition political leaders, democracy and civil society activists. Mahathir ultimately triumphed through both crises, but he was seriously weakened during the second UMNO crisis which led him to identify a more pliant successor and embark on a leadership transition to Abdullah. Tired of the intense

political factionalism and perceived excesses of a Mahathir administration which had often violated democratic norms and condoned corruption, Malaysians gave Abdullah a record electoral victory in 2004 on a platform of reform, good governance, and accountability and transparency in government. The extent of the record 2004 electoral victory gave Abdullah a strong personal mandate as Prime Minister. However, restrictions on political activity and political free speech of the Mahathir era were not lifted. Any discussions of reopening debate on the core issues which have divided Malaysia since independence--Malay special rights, affirmative action, and the ethnic based allocation of political power, resources and wealth--were met with a backlash from hard line Malay nationalist elements.

The opposition--comprising an informal coalition of the multi-racial PKR, Chinese based DAP, and Malay Islamist based PAS--was divided and weak. The Barisan Nasional had triumphed in every election by offering itself as the only multi-ethnic institution capable of governing Malaysia's divided and plural society. The opposition traditionally could not offer an alternative to Barisan Nasional because it was comprised of political parties that appealed to narrow constituencies: Chinese cultural vernacularism, Islamic fundamentalism, or UMNO internal factionalism. The DAP and PAS throughout their histories had been successful on their own terms, but each alone could not hope to govern Malaysia on a national level. PKR, led by former Deputy Prime Minister and UMNO stalwart Anwar Ibrahim, was in a long line of political parties created out of the fallout of UMNO internal factionalism. It was expected to merge back into the UMNO fold after its supporters grew tired of their time in the political wilderness.

Analysis of the 12th Malaysian General Elections

The extent of the “political tsunami” that demolished the long static Barisan Nasional system stunned almost all political forces in Malaysia. Barisan Nasional suffered an unprecedented defeat, losing its comfortable two-thirds parliamentary supra-majority for the first time since 1969.¹ The ruling coalition won just a simple majority of 140 seats, losing 59 seats. UMNO, the Malay party linchpin of the coalition, survived the anti-government swing with 78 seats, winning 67% of its contested seats. However, its non-Malay component partners in peninsular Malaysia, MCA, MIC, Gerakan, and PPP, were wiped out, winning only collectively 20 seats, or 32% of its contested seats. Major leaders such as Gerakan acting President Dr Koh Tsu Koon and MIC President Samy Vellu lost their seats in the electoral rout of these non-Malay Barisan Nasional component parties. The opposition benefited from this collapse in government support by increasing their presence in parliament from 20 to 82 seats. PKR was the biggest performer of the opposition parties, becoming the official opposition with 31 seats, a major increase from its sole seat held in the last parliament by its President Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. DAP and PAS also increased their presence in parliament with 28 and 23 seats respectively, achieving major victories in their urban Chinese and rural Malay electoral strongholds.

Barisan Nasional also suffered further defeats at the state level, failing to wrestle opposition control of the one state of Kelantan, while losing the four states of Penang, Kedah, Perak, and Selangor to the opposition. In Penang, the incumbent Barisan Nasional government led by Gerakan since 1969 was turfed out by the opposition led by the DAP. DAP Secretary-General Lim Guan Eng emerged as Penang’s new Chief Minister with the

opposition controlling two-thirds of the state assembly. In Malaysia's rice bowl state of Kedah, PAS took control of the state in a coalition of 23 seats with PKR. In Perak, the election results produced a hung assembly, with the opposition putting together a precarious minority government.² In Kelantan, under opposition control since 1990, PAS defeated Barisan Nasional with an increased majority after holding a narrow 1 seat advantage at time of dissolution.

In perhaps the biggest surprise of the election, the most industrialized state of Selangor, adjacent to the commercial capital of Kuala Lumpur, fell to an opposition near two-thirds majority of 36 seats led by the PKR. The opposition coalition took control of the state government with the appointment of a PKR secretary-general, Khalid Ibrahim as Chief Minister. In the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur itself, the opposition took 10 of 11 federal seats, including a noted win by Nurul Izzah Anwar, daughter of PKR *de facto* leader Anwar Ibrahim, in the prestigious seat of Lembah Pantai held by a cabinet minister. With a string of opposition victories in Penang, Selangor, and Kuala Lumpur, the Barisan Nasional coalition was shut out of much of urban and industrialized Malaysia. Indeed, while popular vote totals indicated that the Barisan Nasional secured a narrow 51.2% victory on a national level, but it won only 48.1% of the vote in peninsular Malaysia only.³ With these major electoral breakthroughs across the country, the opposition now has reason to claim to represent a significant slice of Malaysian popular opinion, seriously threatening Barisan Nasional as the only popularly representative national institution.

A macro-analysis of the 12th Malaysian general elections must begin with a simple question: what happened? Attention first must turn to the dynamics shaping the

campaign. The campaign itself was a 13-day affair, the longest period of campaigning allotted since the 1969 election. The Barisan Nasional government entered the campaign complacent and overconfident. Wrangling over initial candidate selection led to a great deal of internal factionalism within UMNO, in turn deflating BN's electoral machinery and depressing some of its more rabid partisans. The opposition of PKR, DAP, and PAS, while not formally aligned in a coalition structure, spent a great deal of time co-ordinating their political strategies. To avoid vote splitting, each of the opposition parties pledged to put up only 1 candidate each in "straight fights" with the Barisan Nasional in every peninsular Malaysian constituency.

At the heart of the opposition political strategy was PKR *de facto* leader Anwar Ibrahim, a charismatic orator, an adept political strategist and a political bridge builder between the irreconcilables of the DAP and PAS. Anwar not only kept the peace in the opposition coalition, but he relentlessly toured the country, haranguing Barisan Nasional at his nightly *ceramahs* (political speeches) with vivid anecdotes of Barisan malfeasance. Anwar, originally dismissed by the languid government media as irrelevant, was subsequently demonized as an untrustworthy political chameleon, fueling even more interest in his campaign from ordinary Malaysians. Anwar and the opposition focused their political critiques of the government on so-called bread and butter issues: increases in costs of living, price hikes of household living essentials such as petrol and cooking oil, and a 45% rise in crime during the Abdullah era.⁴ Such a basic bread and butter approach could speak to the broadest spectrum of Malaysian society, irrespective of race and class. Indeed, cries of *Barisan Nasional = Barang Naik* (prices of goods rise) rang out throughout opposition *ceramahs* in the country.

The specific context of Malaysia's fragile multi-ethnic demographic balance also points to larger shifting ethnic political dynamics underpinning the 2008 elections. These shifting political dynamics came out quietly in post election analyses of changing voting patterns by ethnic group for the Barisan Nasional. Preliminary figures reached by the Singaporean based scholar Ong Kian Ming indicated broad based swings against the government from all three of Malaysia's ethnic communities.⁵ The extent of the swings illustrated wide-spread discontent in the non-Malay community, manifesting in 30% and 42% swings against the coalition from the Chinese and Indian communities respectively. Interestingly, the Malay swing against the government was substantially less at 5%. Chinese dissent centered first on the failures to reform the abuses and excesses of the Malay favored New Economic Policy after three decades of implementation. The hard-line Malay nationalist backlash that met some of their critiques of the NEP was voiced in racially provocative statements made by assorted UMNO politicians. These racially provocative statements were centered around the infamous unsheathing of the traditional Malay ceremonial dagger "Keris" during the UMNO general assemblies of 2006-2007.⁶ The increasing Islamization of Malaysian state and society was also a major source of discontent in the Chinese community. The insensitivities of Malaysian religious bureaucrats in the handling of so called "body snatching" cases--literally the spiriting away of the remains of new Muslim converts for Islamic burial rites without the consent of their non-Muslim family members--contributed to a perception that other minority faiths were not respected and religious freedom in Malaysia was steadily eroding. This combination of UMNO's bludgeoning defense of an unrestricted NEP agenda and a

religious bureaucracy seemingly interfering in Chinese cultural and religious autonomy drove an anti-government mood of the Chinese community.

Indian discontent was a relatively recent phenomenon, exploding in the November 2007 *Hindraf* (Hindu Rights Action Force) protests in central Kuala Lumpur of about 30,000 disgruntled members of the Malaysian Indian community. The Indian community, because of its small demographic weight in Malaysia, has long been marginalized in Malaysia in terms of political power, corporate equity and relative absolute poverty. Forming no majority of their own in any Malaysian constituency, most members of the community opted to support the Barisan Nasional in overwhelming numbers through their representative Barisan component party, the MIC, in order to gain access to the Barisan system of the ethnic apportionment of political power and material resources. *Hindraf* was originally an obscure collection of Malaysian Indian lawyers and activists who were drafting a lawsuit against the British crown, claiming damages for the colonial era indentured labor servitude of the Malaysian Indian community. But in the aftermath of the violent repression of the November 2007 protest, the Malaysian Indian community reassessed its unquestioned support for the MIC and the Barisan Nasional. *Hindraf*'s lawsuit against the legacy of British colonialism became less important than its transformation as a vehicle for a Malaysian Indian political reawakening. A demand to address the marginalization of the Malaysian Indian community through confrontation rather through the gradualism advocated by the MIC became the dominant demand of Malaysian Indians, embodied in the Tamil slogan *Makkal Shakthi* (People Power). The huge across the board swing from the Malaysian Indian community was premised on these new confrontational demands.

Dissatisfaction within the Malay community was also building up to the 2008 elections. The slight swing of the Malay community (some 5% against UMNO and the government) illustrates that such discontent was limited to a narrower base than Non-Malay discontent, primarily in urban Kuala Lumpur and in the narrow Northern and East Coast Malay heartland belt. Malay discontent in urban Kuala Lumpur was driven mainly by bread and butter issues of increases in costs of living and price hikes of household daily essentials. The new urbanized Malay professional and working classes, the direct beneficiaries of the New Economic Policy, were hit harder than other communities because of their reliance on salaries and fixed incomes. However, major sociological shifts in the Malay community were also a factor in a slight swing against the government. The increased religiosity of most middle class Malays, originating in the post 1979 Islamic Revival era and accelerated under modernization, made the community less receptive to appeals of material development than appeals premised on spiritual development and moral probity. The political appeal of PAS was attractive for Malays as it is unapologetically Islamist with a strong emphasis on protecting a strong Malay Islamic identity. Attempts by Barisan Nasional to wrestle control of PAS dominated Kelantan during the election with promises of economic development were decisively rejected by the Kelantan electorate. PAS's political platform of an administration derived from Islamic tenets and principles, and its prospective "*negera kebijaksanaan*" (caring society), also allowed it to take control of a second Malay heartland state of Kedah, and make major electoral gains in industrialized Selangor and urban Kuala Lumpur for the first time. Significant increases in Malay popular support for overt Islamist politics is

another important underlying shift in ethnic political dynamics that shaped the historic results of the 2008 elections.

The confluence of these shifting sentiments amongst all three of Malaysia's ethnic communities (Chinese frustration over the abuses of the New Economic Policy and Islamization, Indian self-empowerment and confrontational politics, and urban Malay discontent and a drift towards Islamist politics) led to a historic broad based swing against the government. Ethnic based swings against the government are not infrequent in Malaysian electoral history. The 1969 election witnessed a major Chinese swing against the government, which led to ethnic confrontation and political crisis as Malays largely favored the coalition. The 1999 election witnessed the reverse as Malays, disillusioned with UMNO over the Anwar Ibrahim affair, swung against the coalition while Chinese largely supported it, reminiscent of the 1969 racial riots. However, the absence of threats of ethnic political confrontation over the major defeats suffered by the coalition was directly related to a broad based, multi-ethnic swing against Barisan Nasional. As the results were announced on election night, March 8, 2008, a political calm prevailed as the streets of the capital were quiet and no violence was reported.

Implications of the 12th Malaysian General Elections

Assessments of the aftermath of the 2008 elections immediately turned to the future of incumbent Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and his now badly bruised Barisan Nasional coalition. The loss of its two-thirds parliamentary majority was a major defeat for the coalition as it has always been considered the measuring stick of Barisan electoral performance. A two-thirds supra-majority allows the coalition to amend Malaysia's

constitution at will. Losing the two-thirds majority is a psychological blow to the coalition, but with a simple majority, it is still firmly in control of the federal government.

Almost immediately after the 2008 elections, pressure mounted from within UMNO for Abdullah to resign as party president and Prime Minister, It is certainly fair to state that the political performance of Abdullah over the five years of his premiership was underwhelming. He entered high office in 2003 with high hopes of reforming Malaysia, but he deflated those high expectations with his overcautious, indecisive and ineffectual leadership. Major campaigns against corruption, reforming law enforcement, and introducing transparency in Malaysian government institutions were announced, and later quietly abandoned. Dominated by a kitchen cabinet including his controversial son-in-law Khairy Jalamuddin,⁷ Abdullah was perhaps the weakest Malaysian Prime Minister in history. The worst ever electoral performance of Barisan Nasional in the 2008 elections was a direct repudiation of his leadership .Finally on July 10 2008, Abdullah announced in principle that he would retire as Prime Minister sometime in 2010. Increasing pressure from the Malay grass roots of UMNO forced Abdullah to move up the timetable for the transfer of power to his Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. Najib was sworn in as Prime Minister on April 3 2009 ending Abdullah's brief and disappointing premiership. In this respect, UMNO does not look very kindly on leaders with poor electoral performances, previously ousting two more senior and powerful Prime Ministers, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Mahathir Mohammed for similar electoral setbacks in 1969 and 1999. But perhaps it is not altogether fair to burden Abdullah with most of the blame for the 2008 elections. Abdullah was an accidental Prime Minister; he never actively sought nor contested for the position of UMNO President and Prime

Minister. The malaise of Abdullah's leadership is not the singular cause of the coalition's defeats in the 2008 elections, but just a symptom of a larger political problem now facing the coalition: the institutional rot of UMNO and the non-Malay components of Barisan Nasional. UMNO, which began its life as a strong and an ideologically cohesive political party of Malay nationalism, has been transformed into an ideologically barren clientelist party of dispensing patronage, government contracts and subsidies to prospective supporters. One notable Malaysian newspaper columnist wrote of UMNO's transformation as "no longer the party [of] struggle for *bangsa, agama dan tanahair* (nation, religion and country)...the by words among many party members these days are compensation, reward, commission, projects and *habuan* (share)."⁸

Such a transformation was already apparent during the Mahathir years, but it metastasized during Abdullah's premiership. Any underlying political reform of the system was blocked by powerful clientelist interests in the party, subsequently paralyzing Abdullah's leadership and dashing high expectations held by ordinary Malaysians for Abdullah. The necessity of party renewal, of introducing both internal party rules and governmental guidelines to combat corruption, is the future challenge for Abdullah's successor. However, Malaysia's new Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak will also have to introduce these reforms without substantial non-Malay participation in the Barisan Nasional coalition structure. The non-Malay component parties: MCA, MIC, Gerakan and PPP are so weakened politically after the 2008 elections that they face years of political rebuilding and grassroots renewal in order to become relevant again to their particular ethnic constituencies. Any prospective reform will also have to unfold in an era of increasing internal UMNO party factionalism. Recent periods of UMNO internal

factionalism in 1987-88 and 1998-99 coincided with periods of great Malaysian political instability. How Barisan Nasional absorbs the aftershocks of the 12th Malaysian general elections, and if it responds to its underlying structural weaknesses, will in large matter determine its performance in Malaysia's next general elections, scheduled for 2013.

The aftermath of the 12th Malaysian general elections also poses serious existential challenges for the opposition of PKR, DAP, and PAS. The stunning electoral breakthroughs on election night brought elation to the opposition and its long marginalized supporters. However, with the opposition now in control of five states and a significant presence in parliament, it too must now face the realities of Malaysia's multi-ethnic demographic balance. The informal election specific coalition that emphasized non-competition with each other and political cooperation to defeat a common enemy, Barisan Nasional, must now give way to a formal coalition of power sharing and multi-ethnic governance. In the immediate aftermath of the election, many Malaysians were hopeful of an end to communal based power sharing formulas through an embrace of a truly color blind, multi-racial politics. Indeed, the national success of PKR as an official multi-racial party produced optimism that such a multi-racial politics was possible. Both PKR and DAP must be given credit for offering candidates of diverse racial backgrounds. Of PKR's 31 successful parliamentary candidates, 19 are Malay, 7 are Chinese, and 4 are Indian. Of DAP's 28 successful parliamentary candidates, 22 are Chinese, and 6 are Indian.⁹

But ethnic politics remain as durable and entrenched as ever in Malaysian politics, as indicated by a close analysis of the ethnic composition and balance of the opposition PKR may be an officially multi-racial party but it is Malay based and Malay led. DAP is

a largely urban Chinese based party with Indian participation. PAS remains open to Muslim members only. A truly non-communal based Malaysian politics may not be possible in the short term, but the opposition's communal based makeup could also serve as the strong building blocks of an alternative communal based power sharing and governance institution to the Barisan Nasional. The rise of such an alternative formalized opposition coalition could be the first step to building a legitimate and competitive two-party system in Malaysia. At the heart of the building of such a prospective opposition coalition will be the figure of Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar has had a long career in Malaysian politics, now maturing in its third stage as a prominent opposition leader, after stints as an UMNO Malay nationalist and an Islamist NGO activist. He is a controversial figure, attracting great loyalty and great derision simultaneously. Yet he is a skilled and accomplished politician and remains the only politically viable figure to lead an opposition coalition in competition with Barisan Nasional. After a 10 year ban on active political activity as a result of his controversial convictions for corruption and abuse of power expired in April 2008, Anwar reentered parliament in an easy by-election victory on August 28, 2008. The challenges of the opposition in building this coalition, while also offering effective management of its five controlled states, will in large part determine whether the 2008 elections were either a landmark or an aberration in Malaysian political history.

The historic results of 12th Malaysian general elections will also have certain significant ramifications for some of Malaysia's other political institutions. An immediate impact will be felt with the introduction of a vigorous federalism to Malaysia's political system. With the opposition in control of five states, we can expect

conflicts over the jurisdictions of federal and state governments, the management of natural resources including the sharing of revenues from the state oil company, Petronas, and disputes over federal transfers to state governments to emerge as new flashpoints in Malaysian politics. Malaysia since independence has been an ostensibly federal country, but the long dominance of the Barisan Nasional coalition at all levels of government has made potential conflicts between the federal and state governments moot. The opposition at times has controlled state governments, notably in Kelantan (1959-78, 1990-present) in Trengganu (1959-64, 1999-2004) and in Sabah (1985-94), which sparked occasional conflicts between the federal and state governments.

The opposition's assorted victories in these largely Malay dominated or economically marginal states gave the Barisan Nasional federal government an immense amount of leverage to isolate these states, cutting federal transfers and withdrawing state oil royalties in order to cripple opposition management, thus setting the stage for these states to defect back to Barisan Nasional in the next elections. However, the opposition's control for the first time of the industrial frontline states of Penang and Selangor makes such a politically hardball strategy economically risky and politically untenable. How the Barisan Nasional federal government and the opposition controlled state governments manage their political differences will be a significant measure for a more competitive multi-party system in Malaysia. A first test will come with the opposition's stated intention to revive local government elections, suspended since 1965. Local government is infamous in Malaysia for its inefficiency and its multitude of corruption abuses involving directly appointed local councilors and mayors. Questions have arisen about whether state governments can introduce local government elections unilaterally, or if the

consent of the federal government is needed. Other opposition promises of eliminating or drastically scaling back the New Economic Policy in the awarding of state contracts and tenders have also come into question as the federal government sees such policies as exclusively under federal jurisdiction. A major challenge for the opposition will be to both exercise the distinct powers of state government, but also recognize its limitations. In this respect, the Malaysian constitution gives ultimate primacy to the federal government as federal statutes are recognized to take precedence over state statutes if they are found to be in conflict.

Finally, Malaysia's political culture is also changing in the aftermath of the 2008 elections. Observers had long characterized the Malaysian political system as a semi-democracy, a type of electoral authoritarianism where the Barisan Nasional exercised its democratic legitimacy on narrow procedural terms through the winning of periodic elections, while ignoring general democratic norms in terms of political free speech, political association and civil liberties. Such a model of governance is perhaps akin to the East Asian developmental states of South Korea and Taiwan where political participation and mobilization were discouraged and instead channeled towards economic modernization and development. Malaysia's political culture for years was premised on the basis that development must be the entire focus of its politics. Malaysian political parties became less important as representing ideological currents than as delivery systems for the provision of government services and public works.¹⁰ Barisan's entire 2008 electoral campaign was based on this pragmatic, constituency service approach which emphasized the material benefits of development while ceding national political issues such as democratic reform, corruption, and judicial reform to the opposition.

Malaysia's private and state media endlessly pushed the government's developmental accomplishments, but most Malaysians were not paying attention to the print and broadcast media. Malaysians in large numbers were turning to the Internet, to such websites as *Malaysiakini* [malaysiakini.com] and *Malaysia Today* [http://www.malaysia-today.net/2008/] for their political information. Political discourse on the Internet tackled the central political issues of democracy, political equality, corruption and abuses of power that Barisan Nasional and the mainstream Malaysian media would not address. These new avenues of political communication--the Internet, along with other new technologies such as cell phone text messaging or SMS--did not transform Malaysian political culture by themselves; they simply facilitated the political cultural shifts already sweeping a broad swath of Malaysian society.

Appeals to development and material economic rewards were ineffective for a rapidly evolving political culture in Malaysia more receptive to political appeals framed around democracy, equality, fairness, and transparency. Malaysia's new democratic consensus is a welcome development in its political trajectory, but democratic politics can be no panacea for Malaysia's continuing challenges of multi-ethnic power sharing and governance. There are many issues based around these democratic ideals which can unite Malaysia's three diverse communities. Yet the major shifts of sentiments within each of Malaysia's ethnic communities that produced the historic 2008 election results, such as opposition to the New Economic Policy and affirmative action and debates over religious politics and Islamization, cut across ethnic lines and could lead to future inter-ethnic political conflict. Any democratic shift will be a difficult transition, but ironically, the historical legacy of the Barisan Nasional power sharing formula of multi-ethnic

governance, now challenged with the development of an alternative formalized opposition coalition, could serve to mollify the more difficult aspects of the transition.

¹ “Election Results 2008”, *New Straits Times*, 10 March 2008. “12th General Election Results”, *The Star*, March 10, 2008. Election Commission of Malaysia, accessed March 21, 2008, < <http://www.spr.gov.my/index/pagemulabi.htm>>

² The opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition took power in Perak state March 8, 2008 with 31 of the 59 seats in the state parliament. The government subsequently collapsed January 25 2009 with the defection of 3 members to the previous Barisan Nasional state government. The deposed government subsequently sued and Perak remains in limbo with no recognized state government since January 2009. New state elections may be imminent to resolved the impasse;

³ “Malaysia’s ruling coalition lost more votes than seats: analysts”, March 11, 2008, < <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/beritamalaysia/messages>>

⁴ Baradan Kuppusamy, ‘Rampant crime turns election issue’, in Inter Press Service News Agency , January 8, 2008, < <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=40833>>

⁵ Chok Suat Ling, “Grim Outlook for Barisan allies”, *New Straits Times*, March 10, 2008, L 10

⁶ Carolyn Hong, “Umno reprimands Youth wing leaders for speeches on race”, *Straits Times*, accessed March 21, 2008,< <http://malaysia-today.net/blog2006/newsncom.php?itemid=1113> > The offending remark by an UMNO delegate in response to the unsheathing of the Keris by UMNO youth chief Hishamuddin

Hussein is as follows : “Datuk Hisham has unsheathed his keris, waved his keris, kissed his keris. We want to ask Datuk Hisham when is he going to use it?”

⁷ For more information see Malaysia Today, *Khairy Chronicles - Khairy Jalamuddin : Rasputin or Boy-Genius ?* (Malaysia: np, 2006) , a delightfully entertaining mix of fact and fiction which focuses on the alleged unhealthy influence of the son in law of the Prime Minister.

⁸ Zainon Ahmad, “UMNO must take the blame”, *The Sun*, March 14, 2008, L8

⁹ Election Results 2008”, *New Straits Times*, 10 March 2008. “12th General Election Results”, *The Star*, March 10, 2008.

¹⁰ Francis Loh, “The forthcoming elections”, *Aliran Monthly*, Vol 27 (11/12)