

The Twelfth General Elections in Malaysia

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Abstract: The twelfth general elections in Malaysia resulted in the ruling coalition (Barisan Nasional, BN) losing its two-thirds majority in Parliament. Denying the BN its sought after two-thirds majority is what the opposition parties were campaigning for. Additionally, they won five state assemblies. The electorate voted on the basis of “bread and butter” issues which were highlighted by the ruling coalition as well as the opposition parties.

Key words: elections, Malaysia, Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Rakyat, two-thirds majority

The twelfth general elections in Malaysia were held a little over a year before the eleventh Malaysian Parliament was due to dissolve. As in previous elections, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) party was expected to win the elections. Expectation for a repeat of the results of the eleventh general elections (2004), in which BN won the largest number of seats in its electoral history, was very low. Even the Prime Minister expected that BN would win less than the number of seats it won in 2004. In the eleventh general elections held in March 2004, BN won 91 percent of the federal legislative seats, winning 199 out of 219 seats. This study analyses the twelfth general elections in Malaysia by referring to parties, candidates, the conduct of elections and results at parliamentary and state levels.

The Dewan Rakyat (the House of Representatives) was dissolved by the King (Yang di-Pertuan Agung), on the advice of the Prime Minister, on February 13, 2008. This came a day after Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s denial that the parliament would be

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dissolved that day. The state assemblies of 12 states, except Sarawak, were also dissolved together with the *Dewan Rakyat*. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia provided for elections to be held not more than 60 days after the dissolution of Parliament. Accordingly, the Election Commission set February 24, 2008 as the nomination day, and elections on March 8, 2008. The 13 days available for campaigning were the longest in Malaysian electoral history since 1969.

The elections were conducted in the background of worries over rising oil prices in the global market, the increase in consumer price index, perceptions of ethnic inequality especially among the Indian ethnic group, concerns over the independence of the judiciary, and a revived opposition under the leadership of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. Despite these factors that seemed unfavourable for elections to be held, there were no serious doubts about the ability of BN to continue winning the elections with more than two-thirds majority.

The non-BN parties, Democratic Action Party (DAP), Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the People's Justice Party (PKR), which formed an alliance, were also cautious in their campaign to deny BN's political hegemony. DAP stated that its electoral objective in 2008 was to deny BN its two-thirds majority, although DAP's Secretary General, Lim Guan Eng, admitted that it was impossible to do so. PAS and PKR boasted that they could defeat BN, but their statements were often viewed as political campaigns that lacked serious credibility. The pessimism about these parties was a result of past experiences where even in difficult times, such as following UMNO's split in 1987 and Anwar Ibrahim's sacking in 1998, the ruling BN retained its two-thirds majority in the parliament.

Parties and Candidates

The twelfth general elections were held on March 8, 2008, following a 13-day campaign period. This is the longest campaign period in the BN's era, which earlier campaign period lasted for eight or nine days. Elections were held in 222 parliamentary constituencies, and 505 state assembly constituencies in all states except Sarawak. BN was able to place candidates in all parliamentary and state constituencies. Non-BN parties in the peninsula, DAP, PAS and PKR,

reached an electoral pact among themselves so as not to field candidates against one another. DAP, PAS and PKR, however, could not forge similar arrangements with non-BN parties in Sabah and Sarawak, which are more regionalised in their approach.

Among the non-BN parties, PKR fielded 97 candidates, while PAS fielded 67 and DAP fielded 47 candidates for the parliamentary elections. In the state assemblies, PKR and PAS fielded candidates in all the 12 states where elections were held, while DAP did not field candidates in the Malay-dominated states of Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu.

Although there was no formal coalition among PKR, PAS and DAP, these parties urged their supporters not to vote BN. No other political parties than BN, PKR, PAS and DAP contested the parliamentary elections in the peninsula. The Sarawak Nationalist Party (SNAP) fielded four candidates, Parti Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu (Federation Sabah People Front Party, Bersekutu) fielded two candidates, while United Pasok Nunukragang National Organisation (Pasok) fielded three candidates for the parliamentary elections. A total of 36 independent candidates contested the parliamentary elections.

BN's campaign was premised upon a progress report and manifesto themed "Security, Peace and Prosperity."¹ It was confident of maintaining its two-thirds majority. PKR promised the electorate "a New Dawn for Malaysia" through "a constitutional state, a vibrant, prosperous economy, a safer Malaysia, an affordable Malaysia and a better education for all."² PAS's manifesto downplayed its Islamic agenda, and instead aimed at creating a "trustworthy, just and clean government" toward achieving "a nation of care and opportunity."³ DAP's manifesto was titled "Malaysia Can Do Better!" telling voters to "just change it - change for democracy, a better quality of life and a brighter future for our children."⁴ The campaign period of 13 days provided the non-BN parties better opportunities to reach the electorate. Among the major issues of the elections were rising oil and consumer item prices, ethnic inequality and alleged corruption of the government.

The Election Commission (EC) had also become a constant target of the opposition for its alleged bias. For its part, EC had introduced

transparent ballot boxes to ensure the electorate of its impartial stance. It also introduced the use of indelible ink to prevent multiple voting.⁵ The move to introduce indelible ink was met with enthusiasm and support by political parties and civil society. However, the use of such ink was revoked on March 4, 2008, just four days before the general elections, on the allegation that similar ink had allegedly been brought in to disrupt the electoral process. EC's decision to cancel the use of indelible ink helped to give credence to perceptions of electoral manipulation by the government.

BN, with its advantages of incumbency, could stage intensive campaigns. In addition to campaigning directly to the electorate, it also used the mainstream media to urge voters to elect its candidates. The opposition parties relied heavily on political *ceramah* and door-to-door campaigning. Despite getting very little favourable coverage by the mainstream media, the opposition parties compensated for this handicap through the new media, i.e., the Internet, specifically through the parties' websites, weblogs of candidates and *You-Tube* (Internet video). The influence of this new media on the outcomes of the elections, however, is still debatable as surveys indicated that the Internet ranked lower than the mainstream newspapers and television as the electorate's sources of news.⁶

Results of Parliamentary Elections

Polling for the elections took place between 8.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m. on 8 March 2008 without many problems. A minor incident was reported in Marang, Terengganu, where a group of PAS supporters clashed with BN supporters and the police when the former tried to stop several buses from sending voters to the polling stations on suspicion that "phantom" voters were being brought into some particular constituencies. This election day incident, however, was confined to only that constituency. Elections in other constituencies were mostly peaceful and orderly.

When votes were counted after the end of the polling period, some unexpected results were recorded. BN lost its two-thirds majority in the *Dewan Rakyat* for the first time in its history. BN won 140 parliamentary seats, eight seats short of its target for a two-thirds majority. Among the opposition parties, PKR, DAP and PAS won 31, 28 and 23 parliamentary seats, respectively. BN's margin

Table 1: Results of the Twelfth Parliamentary Elections

Parties	Seats Contested	Seats Won in 2008	Seats Won in 2004
BN	222	140	199
DAP	47	28	12
PAS	67	23	6
PKR	97	31	1
SNAP	4	0	0
Bersekutu	2	0	0
Pasok	3	0	0
Independents	36	0	1
Total	478	222	219

Source: Abdul Rashid Moten and Tunku Mohar Mokhtar, "The 2004 General Elections in Malaysia: A Mandate to Rule," in *Asian Survey*, 46:2, 319-340; and "Election Results 2008: A New Straits Times Special," *New Straits Times*, March 10, 2008.

of victory was helped by its performance in East Malaysia where it won 55 of 57 seats there. By comparison, of the 165 parliamentary seats in the peninsula, BN won 85 seats, while the opposition parties together won 80 seats. Party fortunes in the twelfth parliamentary elections along with their performance in 2004 elections are shown in Table 1.

BN's failure to secure a two-thirds majority can be attributed to the failure of BN's non-Malay components in the peninsula to secure the votes of the non-Malays. Table 2 shows a comparison of the seats BN component parties won in 2004 and 2008. None of the non-Malay components of BN won more than 50 percent of the seats they contested. As a result, the representation of the non-Malays by BN has significantly decreased. The Malaysian Indian Congress, the leading party of the Indians suffered a serious defeat when six of the nine candidates it nominated lost in the elections. Similarly, the BN's Chinese representation in parliament has significantly reduced because of the poor performance of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and *Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (Malaysian People Movement, Gerakan). The non-Malay representation shifted to DAP and also PKR, and their voices would be in opposition to the government.

UMNO continued to capture the Malay votes, although with 31 seats less than the 2004 general elections. However, unlike the other BN component parties in the peninsula, UMNO could still claim to be representing the ethnic interests it is supposed to champion. BN's strength in the peninsula was in Johor, Melaka, Pahang, Terengganu and Perlis, where it performed better than the opposition parties. BN also won two more parliamentary seats than its opposition in Perak, but it won three state assembly seats less than the opposition parties combined in Perak. BN also won convincingly in Sabah and Sarawak, losing only one parliamentary seat each in both states. The opposition parties won more seats than BN in Kedah, Kelantan, Pulau Pinang, Selangor and Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur.

DAP won seven parliamentary seats in Pulau Pinang, six in Perak, five in Kuala Lumpur, four in Selangor, two in Negeri Sembilan, and one each in Melaka, Johor, Sabah and Sarawak. It did not win any parliamentary seat in Pahang, and did not field any parliamentary candidate in the predominantly Malay states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. PAS won nine parliamentary seats in Kelantan, six in Kedah, four in Selangor, two in Perak, and one each in Terengganu and Kuala Lumpur. It did not win any parliamentary seat in Perlis, Pulau Pinang, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Sabah and Sarawak. PKR, which won only one parliamentary seat in 2004, won 30 more seats in 2008: nine seats in Selangor, five seats in Kedah, four seats each in Pulau Pinang

and Kuala Lumpur, three seats each in Kelantan and Perak, two seats in Pahang, and one seat in Negeri Sembilan.

The results of the twelfth general elections in Peninsular Malaysia altered the trends of earlier general elections under BN. PAS's success in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur changed the perception of it being a rural Malay party. PKR and DAP were also successful in mixed constituencies, once considered BN's stronghold. Even PAS made inroads to two constituencies, Hulu Langat and Kota Raja, where the percentage of Malay voters was less than 60 percent. The performance of the opposition parties ended BN's invincibility in the mixed constituencies.

BN's strength in the peninsula was in the Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies. In 90 constituencies with more than 60 percent Malays, BN won 56, while PAS 21, and PKR 13 seats (see Table 3). However, in 75 parliamentary constituencies with less than 60 percent Malays, BN could win only 29, while DAP 26, PKR 18, and PAS 2 seats. One of the most significant implications of the twelfth general elections, especially in the peninsula, is that BN could

Table 3: Electoral Outcomes of the Twelfth Malaysian General Elections in Three Categories of Constituencies, Peninsular Malaysia

Parties	Constituencies with more than 60 percent Malays	Constituencies with more than 60 percent Chinese	Constituencies where Malays and Chinese are between 40.1 and 59.9 percent
BN	56	1	28
DAP	0	14	12
PAS	21	0	2
PKR	13	0	18
Total	90	15	60

Source: Calculated from "Election Results 2008: A New Straits Times Special," *New Straits Times*, March 10, 2008.

no longer claim that it is a truly multiethnic political party. The electoral outcomes also imply that the representation of non-Malays in the twelfth parliament is to be carried out by the opposition parties.

Table 3 suggests that BN's support in the non-Malay majority constituencies has significantly reduced. The opposition parties managed to break BN's dominance in such constituencies. It can be inferred that BN has significantly lost support among the non-Malay constituencies, due in large part of its failure to address bread-and-butter issues such as rising fuel and consumer prices and the perception that it perpetuated ethnic inequality among the Chinese and Indian ethnic minorities. The Hindu Rights Action Force's (HINDRAF) demands for the government to protect ethnic Indian rights in November 2007 were dismissed as trivial, but this had affected the ethnic Indians' support for BN. HINDRAF's slogan, *Makkal Sakthi* (People's Power), on the other hand, was adopted by the opposition parties, which may explain the ethnic Indians' support for DAP, PKR and even PAS.

Table 3 also suggests that BN was almost totally rejected in constituencies containing more than 60 percent Chinese voters. The only seat it won in such a constituency was in Kampar, where MCA defeated DAP. The success of DAP in these constituencies is a reversal of a trend that began in 1995 where the Chinese electorate generally voted BN for what a political scientist terms "politics of developmentalism."⁷ It can be argued that the BN's failure to sustain this politics of developmentalism, due partly because of the worldwide impact of rising oil prices, may have contributed to this change of support among the Chinese electorate.

The electorate of the twelfth general elections had also registered some upsets. Three presidents of BN component parties, Samy Vellu of MIC, Koh Tsu Koon of Gerakan and M. Kayveas of PPP, lost their seats. Samy was a long-serving minister, Koh was the Chief Minister of Pulau Pinang, and Kayveas was a Deputy Minister. Other Ministers who lost their seats in the elections were Shahrizat Jalil, Zainuddin Maidin and Aziz Shamsuddin. Several former Deputy Ministers also lost their seats, including UMNO's Zainal Abidin Zin, MCA's Fu Ah Kiow, Gerakan's Chia Kwang Chye and MIC's K. Sothinathan.

State Assembly Election Results

In the state assemblies, the opposition defeated BN in four states - Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Perak and Selangor - in addition to retaining

Kelantan, which PAS won since 1990. PAS secured a comfortable two-thirds majority in Kelantan, compared to just one state seat advantage it held before the State Assembly was dissolved. In the other four states, none of the opposition parties won an absolute majority, which necessitated coalition-building. PAS formed the state government of Kedah in coalition with the PKR. In Pulau Pinang, DAP and PKR's alliance formed the state government. PKR formed the Selangor state government in coalition with DAP and PAS.

The situation in Perak was a bit difficult since DAP and PAS did not forge a formal coalition. All DAP's elected representatives are non-Malays, and only three of PKR's elected representatives are Malays but they lack paper qualifications. The state Constitution of Perak requires that the *Menteri Besar* must be a Malay Muslim. Perak's DAP leadership initially accepted Perak's PAS secretary, Nizar Jamaluddin as the *Menteri Besar*, but this was met with disapproval from DAP's Central Committee because DAP did not have any formal coalition with PAS. However, the central leadership of DAP, PKR and PAS finally agreed to Nizar's appointment. All the state assembly members from the three parties submitted a letter of

Table 4: Electoral Outcomes in the Twelfth General Elections 2008, State Assemblies

States	BN	DAP	PAS	PKR	Independent	Total
Perlis	14	-	1	0	-	15
Kedah	14	1	16	4	1	36
Kelantan	6	-	38	1	-	45
Terengganu	24	-	8	0	0	32
Pulau Pinang	11	19	1	9	0	40
Perak	28	18	6	7	0	59
Pahang	37	2	2	0	1	42
Selangor	20	13	8	15	0	56
Negeri Sembilan	21	10	1	4	0	36
Melaka	23	5	0	0	-	28
Johor	50	4	2	0	0	56
Sabah	59	1	0	0	0	60
Total	307	73	83	40	2	505

Source: Calculated from "Election Results 2008: A New Straits Times Special," *New Straits Times*, March 10, 2008.

undertaking, affirming their support for Nizar, to the Regent of Perak as required by the latter.

In the five states won by the non-BN parties, only the state governments in Kelantan and Pulau Pinang secured a two-thirds majority. Perak was the most delicate for the non-BN parties since they only have 31 seats compared to BN's 28. In the seven states won by BN, it only failed to secure two-thirds majority in Negeri Sembilan. In all, four states - Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan - were without two-thirds majority for the state governments. In the 2004 elections, only PAS-ruled Kelantan was without two-thirds majority. In these states, as in the post-twelfth elections federal legislature, the governments could not amend their constitutions easily.

BN captured majority seats in Perlis, Terengganu, Pahang, Melaka, Johor and Sabah. Except for Perlis and Sabah where BN won all but one seats in each of the state assemblies, BN's share of seats in the other four states is reduced which is not surprising considering the trends in other states. Of interest is the success of PAS's candidates to win two state assembly seats in Johor, and one state assembly seat in Negeri Sembilan.⁸ Johor and Negeri Sembilan are known to be UMNO's stronghold, not PAS's.⁹ The turnaround in some states in the peninsula, however, did not affect Sabah.

The most important outcome of the elections is BN's loss of two-thirds majority in the federal legislature. BN has always emphasised a two-thirds majority in parliament in order to build a strong government, while the opposition parties had been campaigning for a need to have a stronger presence of the opposition in parliament through breaking the two-thirds majority. This time around, the electorate chose to send more opposition leaders to parliament, and even changed governments in four states other than Kelantan.

The non-BN parties' consistent campaign of the failure of the government to control oil and consumer prices, marginalisation of the ethnic Indians, and allegations of corruption found support from a significant segment of the electorate. Despite having very little media exposure, the non-BN parties worked very hard to send their messages to the electorate. Indeed, the 13 days campaigning period also helped the leaders to reach out to the voters. Even though PAS

and DAP are considered to be strange partners, the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, helped moderate people's fears about the future of this electoral pact.

The success of the non-BN parties in the five states also paved the way to formalisation of their cooperation. Several weeks after the elections, the leaders of DAP, PAS and PKR reached an understanding to create a formal political alliance, which they call Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance). Pakatan Rakyat will be a model of consociationalism built at the state levels, quite different from the current hegemonic consociationalism model of BN that is based on UMNO's dominance. The fact that none of the parties in Pakatan Rakyat has an absolute majority would necessitate a fairer cooperation and equal partnership among the components. It is still too early at this stage to discuss the prospects of Pakatan Rakyat.

Conclusion

The twelfth general elections returned BN as the government at the federal level and in seven states in the federation. The opposition political parties in alliance, now known as Pakatan Rakyat, managed to reduce BN's two-thirds majority in the federal legislature, and won five state assemblies. The electoral outcomes dispelled the notion of BN's invincibility in Malaysian elections. While there were indications that ethnicity has become less important in the elections with the victory of the non-BN parties in mixed constituencies, the fact remains that BN is stronger in Malay-majority constituencies while DAP dominates in Chinese-majority constituencies. It seems too early to discount the race as a factor in Malaysian politics. The electorate also voted based on the economic and ethnic issues highlighted by the non-BN parties.

Notes

1. Barisan Nasional, *Selamat, Aman, Makmur* [online] available from http://bn2008.org/bm_manifesto2008.pdf, accessed on March 6, 2008.

2. Parti Keadilan Rakyat, *Harapan Baru untuk Malaysia* [online] available from http://keadilanrakyat.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=545, accessed March 6, 2008.

3. Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, *A Trustworthy, Just and Clean Government* [online] available from [http://pru12.pas.org.my/manifesto/ManifestoPartiIslamSe-Malaysia\(BI\).pdf](http://pru12.pas.org.my/manifesto/ManifestoPartiIslamSe-Malaysia(BI).pdf), accessed March 6, 2008.
4. Democratic Action Party, *Malaysia Can Do Better* [online] available from http://salinankarbon.com/DAP/manifesto/web_edition/DAP%202008%20General%20Elections.htm, accessed March 6, 2008.
5. The indelible ink is to be applied in one of the fingers of the voters as proof that they have voted.
6. See, for example, a survey undertaken by the Merdeka Centre for Opinions Research at [http://www.merdekakcenter.uni.cc/download/FNS%20 poll%20election%202008%20v1.pdf](http://www.merdekakcenter.uni.cc/download/FNS%20poll%20election%202008%20v1.pdf), accessed May 14, 2008.
7. On politics of developmentalism, see Loh Kok Wah, Francis, "Developmentalism and the Limits of Democratic Discourse," in Loh Kok Wah, Francis and Khoo Boo Teik, *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2002).
8. It is interesting to note that the two constituencies PAS won in Johor comprised a significant number of non-Malay voters. In Sungai Abong constituency, there were 52.9 percent Malays, 43.9 percent Chinese, 2.9 percent Indians, and 0.2 percent persons of other communities; while in Maharani, the Malays were 54.5 percent, Chinese were 42.5 percent, Indians were 2.8 percent, and other ethnic groups were 0.2 percent. This may imply that the PAS's candidates were helped by the non-Malay constituencies assuming that Johor is UMNO's stronghold.
9. Although PAS had a seat in the 2004 elections in Johor, that seat was gained through technicality when BN's candidate was disqualified because of her failure to follow electoral laws during the nomination process.