

What Americans must know about democracy in Malaysia

by Hardev Kaur and Ramon Navaratnam

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The results of Malaysia's 10th general election, held on Nov. 29, has been enlightening. Firstly, it shows that democracy works in Malaysia. Secondly, it proves that Malaysians have voted for continuity and stability, and, finally, the results prove that Malaysians are mature, and value racial harmony, peace, and stability.

The outcome of the general election also proves that elections in this country are free. Or else, the opposition Pan Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS, which controls the state government in Kelantan, would not have been able to make inroads into a number of states and capture another state—Terengganu. In addition, a number of ministers lost their seats. This shows that the electorate is able to exercise their right to select whomever they want.

Malaysians can also be proud of themselves that the whole exercise went without any untoward incident. Numerous foreign reports had continued to hint of possible unrest during the election, or even after the results. But they were sadly disappointed.

Unlike in some developing countries, where killings and bloodshed accompany elections, in Malaysia there was peace and harmony. "It is like a carnival," one foreign journalist covering the elections observed. And, indeed, it was, with supporters of opposing candidates seen singing together and helping each other in the true Malaysian spirit of racial harmony.

Not only did the various Malaysian races show that they

can work in harmony, but they also proved to the world that they are sensible enough to ensure racial harmony, peace, and stability. This is not something that comes easily, as is evident around the world. Despite the dire forecasts, Malaysians have proven many of their critics wrong by voting for "continuity, peace, and stability," the slogan of the Barisan Nasional ruling coalition.

The efficiency of the Malaysian system was also evident from the fact that the full results were known within less than 24 hours after the polling stations closed.

This was an achievement, as it was the first time that polling in the two east Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak was conducted in just one day. Previously, polling in these two states used to be staggered over at least two days, due to the remote nature of some areas. But economic development and the efficient infrastructure enabled polling to be conducted in just one day.

As soon as Parliament was dissolved, some had concluded that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad's political future was "on the line." But, with Dr. Mahathir not only retaining his seat with a comfortable majority, and obtaining the two-thirds majority in Parliament that he had asked for, it is the reputation and credibility of some the major foreign media that is "on the line." They have been wrong in their analysis and predictions on every count regarding Malaysia—its politics and economics.

One of the most absurd such views was filed by *New York Times's* reporter Wayne Arnold in his Dec. 4 story on Malaysia's elections, where he wrote: "But behind the election results . . . is a growing impatience with Malaysia's failure to take the kind of financial and corporate medicine that the International Monetary Fund has prescribed for Thailand, Indonesia, and South Korea. Mr. Mahathir appears to have won little gratitude for having spared Malaysia whatever humiliation might have come from inviting foreign assistance."

A convincing win

Even as the opposition made inroads into other states, and wrested control of Terengganu, in addition to retaining Kelantan, the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition retained its two-thirds majority. The coalition won 148 seats in Parliament, and made a clean sweep of at least two states in the Federation—Johore and Negri Sembilan.

Undoubtedly, the opposition made inroads into more states and increased their representation in the Dewan Rakyat, or lower house of Parliament. But even so, the Barisan Nasional garnered 56.5% of the popular vote at the federal level, and 56.4% of the popular vote in the 11 state legislative assemblies. In one state, Johore, the Barisan Nasional garnered 72.9% of the popular vote for Parliament and 72.2% for the state.

The national percentage is higher than the 53% that Bari-



Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad was returned to office with a comfortable majority, leaving financier George Soros and the major foreign media foaming at the mouth.

san Nasional received in 1990, when the leading United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was split, with several Cabinet ministers leaving the party to join Semangat 46. (Those breakaway factions later rejoined UMNO.)

The popular vote obtained by the Barisan Nasional, which is an endorsement of the policies and leadership of Dr. Mahathir, is more than what U.S. President Bill Clinton obtained for his Presidency.

The business sector, including foreign investors, have welcomed the results. The appointment of the Cabinet, which sees Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin and Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz continue in their portfolios, means a continuation of the “winning” economic team and policies, including selective exchange controls, which were the subject of severe criticism.

However, Dr. Mahathir, who was described as “a menace to his own country” by George Soros, has now been thoroughly vindicated by his own people. The response from the market was certainly positive, as it rose to its highest level since Aug. 24, 1999 on Monday, Dec. 13, the first trading day after the announcement of the new Cabinet.

There will be numerous analyses and scrutiny of the results, but one thing is clear, and that is that UMNO and its other partners in the Barisan Nasional cannot afford to be complacent, and they need to get on with the job of serving the people.

The electorate is more educated and mature, and the de-

mands on their representatives are vastly different. The high voter turnout of 70% is an indicator of the awareness of Malaysians regarding their democratic rights. This is more than can be said of many developed countries whose leaders constantly preach the virtues of free and democratic elections.

In the 1996 U.S. election, it is said that less than half of all eligible voters registered to vote, and only 49.2% of those registered voters participated in the election, strongly suggesting that a distinct *minority* elected the President. In fact, President Clinton was reelected with a smaller popular vote than Democrat Michael Dukakis received in his unsuccessful bid against George H.W. Bush in 1988.

Wake-up call

UMNO, the leader and the major party in the 14-party coalition (which faces its own leadership elections next year), needs to re-examine its strengths and weaknesses fast and undertake the necessary action. It cannot afford to be further divided and weakened. A stable, prosperous, and peaceful Malaysia needs a united and strong UMNO.

The inroads made by PAS into at least five of the 11 states contested must be taken as a sign that UMNO has to work much harder. It cannot continue as it has previously, because times have changed. Just as the country has developed and progressed, so has the thinking and aspirations of the voters.

PAS has been working for a long time to woo supporters among the youth, professionals, and the educated. It has been relentless in its efforts to win support among Malaysian students abroad, while not neglecting the home front.

Its membership profile may come as a surprise to many who think that PAS membership is still made up of the “religious and *pondok*” (hut) segments of Malay society. It is much more than that, with a wider and more varied membership base, including the educated and professionals.

The fact that PAS now has representatives in the urban centers and not just in the rural areas and the villages, also means that from now on, UMNO and its Barisan Nasional components need a different strategy in dealing with the opposition, led by PAS.

It does not, however, mean that the Barisan Nasional should ignore the Democratic Action Party (DAP), whose leaders, such as Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh, suffered unprecedented losses in the Nov. 29 election.

There is greater awareness among Malaysians of their rights as voters, and they exercise their rights, as is evident from the high voter turnout. The Election Commission can be sure that the next registration exercise will see many more of those eligible coming forward to register as voters earlier, unlike in previous exercises where many waited till it was too late.

It is also important for the ruling coalition to get its act together, to identify the weaknesses and the “enemy within,” and prepare itself for the new millennium.