

## 1999 Malaysia's General Elections: Does Voting Consist of a Single Factor or Several Factors?

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**Abstract:** Prior to 1999 Malaysia's general election, the elections had taken place in the years of 1959, 1964, 1969, 1974, 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990 and 1995. The election is a mechanism under democracy practices to make a choice via a voting process by registered voters in electing leaders with the ability to serve society as well as forming a government. Elections before this had presented their own meaning and history. The Barisan Nasional Party or National Front which was the backbone of strength for the government through its victory in all the elections had never failed to uphold its majority except in the years 1969, 1990 and 1999 whereby their votes decreased. This study examines the factors that contribute to the trend in Malaysia's electoral behavior in the 1999 Malaysia's general elections whether voting consist of a single factor or several factors.

**Key words:** Malaysian general elections, voting behaviour, election issues, Barisan nasional (National front), Barisan alternatif (alternative front), Malaysia

### INTRODUCTION

The nation's political atmosphere during the 1999 elections was different in comparison to previous elections held (Case, 2001). This difference was in the winning whereby while a large victory was seen in the 1995 elections, 1999 witnessed a tremendous change from the point of the understanding and comprehension of what an election was all about; issues which brought about unrest within the nation's politics though not to the point of instability or chaos in the country.

The 1995 elections could be considered an elections with total and undivided support upon the leadership of Barisan Nasional or National front (BN) as BN had managed to fulfill almost all of its promises as stated in its manifesto mainly from the aspect of development and Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister himself was seen at the peak of his time as a regal leader not only for Malaysia but also highly respected leader of the third world as well as an exemplary leader of Muslim countries (Pandian, 2005).

The 29 November 1999 General Elections, 10th in Malaysia's general elections history since, independence again saw BN as the ruling coalition to govern the country with two third majority. BN won 148 seats from 193 seats contested (Election Commission, 2002). However, it was reduced from 162 won in the 1995 general elections. The opposition made inroads by winning 45 seats compared to 30 seats in he previous elections Table 1.

Table 1: Malaysia general elections result for 1995 and 1999

Political parties	Seats	
	1995 (N = 192)	1999 (N = 193)
Barisan Nasional	UMNO-94	UMNO-72
	Others-68	MCA-29
		MIC-7
		Others-40
	162* (65%)	148 (56%)
Opposition	Pas-7	Pas-27
	DAP-9	DAP-10
	Semangat 46-6	Keadilan-5
	PBS-8	PBS-3
	30 (35%)	45 (44%)

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The 1999 elections witnessed the behaviour and perception of the public experiencing a sudden and dramatic change. The data was gathered through interviews with selected respondents or key stakeholders of the election such as voters, politicians, non-governmental organization leaders and media practitioners. The information gathered were analysed to identify factors contributed to the voting pattern among voters in the 1999 Malaysian general elections. Content analysis methodology was also used to interpretate secondary data obtained from various sources related to this study.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were two important events which had left their mark and influence on the voting poles in the elections:

**The Dismissal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, A worrying internal party crisis:** The 1999 elections witnessed the issue of Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal dominating the elections campaign (Saw and Kesavapany, 2006). The disagreement in seeing eye to eye between Mahathir and Anwar was clearly seen in several aspects which arose due to the current surroundings and events. This was a follow-up from the economic crisis which had come upon Asia including Malaysia. A clash of two varying economic approaches could be considered as the pushing point of the conflict between these two leaders (Pandian, 2005).

Mahathir, who had built a new world for Malaysia insisted on preventing and controlling the economic crisis in his own way whereas Anwar was seen as using the crisis as a way to overthrow Mahathir and become the new Prime Minister of Malaysia. United Malays National Organization party (UMNO) leaders began to have conflicts among one another. Anwar's impatience and Mahathir's aspirations and perseverance to restore the nation's economy and return Malaysia to its original role as a giant among the fast developing nations left Mahathir no choice but to dismiss Anwar on 2nd September, 1998 from his position as Deputy Prime Minister and all his other positions in the government (Funston, 2000).

The next day, Anwar was relinquished of his position as Deputy President of UMNO. Anwar who had persevered in proving his loyalty and support towards Mahathir several days before his dismissal, considered this an injustice and took action to protect and uphold his position in any possible way. Demonstrations and public gatherings were held on large scales with his home becoming the centre of attraction to the public. Action was then taken on members of the party who supported Anwar.

Reform movements such as these which were likened to the movements for democracy such as Doi Moi in Vietnam by ex-Vice President of the United States, Al Gore in the Asia Pacific Economic Caucus (APEC) held in Malaysia in 1998 and which also took place in Indonesia, Thailand and South Korea, left Mahathir no other option but to arrest Anwar under the Internal Security Act (ISA) on 20th September, 1998 after approximately 3 weeks since, his dismissal (Weiss, 2000). Anwar was then charged in court on several accusations including bribery and unnatural sexual activities. The court found him guilty and sentenced Anwar to 14 years imprisonment (Teik, 2000). Anwar's new life behind bars did not reflect a victory to Mahathir. Society began to question his move of dismissing Anwar and furthermore, the charge against Anwar for unnatural sexual activities was considered

going overboard especially among the Malay community which looked upon it as going against the norm and cultural values of the Malay society. It was also considered clashing with the social contract between Demang Lebar Daun and Sang Sapurba in the Malay Annals whereby a verbal contract was agreed upon as to not bring embarrassment upon anyone in whatever the situation may be (Brown, 1970).

Although, Mahathir had no intentions to embarrass Anwar, however his actions were considered by some as a personal attack and not in the interest of the nation, even though Mahathir denied such views (Pandian, 2005). The closure of the Anwar issue in court did not mean the closure of the case at that point; instead it was just the starting point which was then expanded and used to gain votes and supports in the 1999 elections. The question of whether charges against Anwar was true or not did not raise but rather how it was manipulated to influence the perception of the voters was seen in the outcome of the 1999 general elections.

### **1997 ASIA ECONOMIC CRISIS**

The economic crisis which hit Asia in 1997 caused the Asian countries to not only encounter economic problems but also an unstable political climate which saw demonstrations and uproars take place in attempts to bring down a regime and substitute it with a new one (Crotty, 1999). This occurred in Indonesia, Thailand and South Korea. Suharto fell after huge riots took place in Indonesia whilst in Thailand, Banhan Slipa-Archa and Chaovalit handed in their resignations in 1997 and South Korean President Kim Young San was defeated in the President elections in December, 1997.

The change of regime brought about a shift in the market and was more pro-American and open in nature. This crisis which had its onset in Thailand altered the internal surrounding scenario of almost all the countries within the Asian region. The atmosphere in Malaysia was also different as Mahathir was an economic mastermind in forming the economic planning and strategy in order to protect Malaysia from having to go through the colonization process once more via loans and economic policies which were suggested by the World Bank or International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Mohamad, 2003). The embankment needed to save Malaysia was erected immediately on the grounds of security policies.

Their opposing views in handling this economic problem had dragged both Mahathir and Anwar into the throngs of power struggle to continue leading. Although in most Asian countries, the old regimes were brought down, this did not take place in this country despite the

plunging rates of market rates and index of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE). This portrayed Mahathir's strength as he was a strategist within himself. He refused to pledge the country's pride by accepting a loan from the IMF. What he did was to go against the norms within the economic practices. Mahathir introduced the Foreign Currency Control Policy which not only prevented the Ringgit (RM\$) from fluctuating in its value but instead remained unchanged at the value of \$3.80 cent per dollar (Mohamad, 2003).

Business entrepreneurs were unable to withdraw their savings as the transfer of their savings and capital was temporarily blocked what more with the value of the dollar unchanging regardless of business climate and current investment. This bond caused the ringgit to lose its value in the international market but simultaneously helped in saving the domestic economy almost immediately. The nation's economy was successfully healed and restored whilst countries which accepted the aid of the IMF were far behind in their recovery.

The change of regime occurred in Indonesia when President Suharto who had ruled for 32 years fell due to pressure via demonstrations whilst in South Korea, a new President began to take the lead of the country's leadership and in Thailand, Chuan Leekpai replaced the previous Prime Minister to ensure the recovery of their economic status. In Malaysia, Mahathir bravely held the power but its effect was clear in the 1999 elections when BN gained its victory with a small majority what more with Kelantan state still in the hands of Malaysian Islamic party (PAS) and the most shocking was BN's defeat to PAS in Terengganu state (Ahmad *et al.*, 2000).

Both of the above issues have left great impact on the results of the 1999 elections. The reformation which took place in the Asian countries seeped its way into Malaysia momentarily due to the presence of alternative media channels which provided information on the side which was difficult to obtain via the main media waves. The continuous reform movements and several government actions which left a great effect in the 10th elections.

The Malaysian society observed an election which was great as well as heart-racing. From the days of Alliance party (Parti Perikatan) till the formation of BN, UMNO was the dominant party within that coalition of parties. UMNO's performance was vital in ensuring that the country's sovereignty under its reign was unthreatened. The party BN, especially UMNO which was the backbone of the Malay community power was at its falling edge when the party's support began to falter (Funston, 2000). The leaders of UMNO were being openly

challenged and criticized and the tradition of its ruling was being questioned by the Malays, especially those of middle class society.

The widening gap between the rich and the poor also began to influence their way of thought focusing mainly on whether the government was able to handle problems faced by small-scale traders and entrepreneurs. The UMNO youth leader's speech during the UMNO general assembly in 1997 which touched on the aspects of cronyism, nepotism and corruption opened the eyes of several parties as if they had been pushed aside all this time (Teik, 2000). This also added in influencing society's voting style. The dismissal of Anwar also saw the emergence of the collaboration party Alternative front or Barisan Alternatif (BA) comprising of several opposition parties namely PAS, People Justice Party or Keadilan Party (ADIL), Malaysia People Party or Party Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) and Democratic Action Party (DAP). PAS which was suggested as taking advantage of this issue actually emerged as the biggest victor in the elections (Case, 2001).

They not only managed to maintain Kelantan in their power but also succeeded in taking over Terengganu whilst in several other states such as Perlis, Kedah, Pahang and Selangor, they managed to win and obtain a higher number of seats and any defeat they suffered to BN was with a much smaller majority in comparison to that of the 1995 elections (Election Commission, 2002). This victory also enabled PAS for the very first time to hold the position of chief opposition in the Dewan Rakyat led by at first the late Allahyarham Ustaz Fadzil Noor and then followed by Datuk Hadi Awang, the ex-Chief Minister of Terengganu.

The emergence of ADIL as a splinter following the dismissal of Anwar under the leadership of his wife, Datin Seri Wan Azizah Ismail (Richburg, 1999). Although, standing for elections for the first time, ADIL's party performance proved far better than several other parties which had stood for elections preciously. This included the support and presence of several leaders who had been actively involved in UMNO before opting to leave the party or had been ousted from the party by the UMNO Disciplinary Committee. The elections also bore witness to the large number of Ministers and Deputy Ministers of UMNO who were defeated by their opponents (Kuppuswamy, 1999). BN's failure in solving several issues so much so that the situation forced the voters to change their voting poles regardless of BN's efforts in convincing the voters that all their actions were taken in the interest of the Nation's development and society's welfare. This involved convincing them that the economy

had recovered with the market price escalating, the presentation of a people friendly budget including giving bonuses to government employees (Case, 2001). Simultaneously, the government attempted to provide a surrounding whereby the political atmosphere did not display any flaws or handicap even though demonstrations were still occurring in smaller numbers compared to those in 1998.

The issues of riots occurring in Indonesia as well as the riot of May 13, 1969, issues of an Islamic country and the flow of information via posters and advertisements was maximized in order to influence the voters at that time. About 680,000 new voters were unable to cast their ballots as the list of names was not published in time. For the first time, the opposition was able to build a strong cooperation amongst them and to form a more orderly organization. The collaboration of opposition parties known as BA succeeded in setting aside their respective ideology differences by launching together a united manifesto as well as ensuring a fair division of seats among all the members of BA.

Harakah became the most effective alternative media organ so much so that it broke sales records up to 340,000 copies during the elections (Netto, 2000). Resources and machinery of BA during this election was among the most effective in the history of opposition involvement in elections what more with it being strengthened with the fighting will and sacrifice of the members of the BA parties. The internet became the alternative to the mainstream mass media channel which was dominated by BN. Hence, the emergence of several web pages which became active merely to bring about the downfall of the BN government which was seen as being too long on the leader's throne.

There were members of BA parties who used the government's machinery to make announcements and copies of the news were published on the internet for their work colleagues (Heufers, 2002). Talks were actively held and assemblies and gatherings with thousands of attendees which displayed a strong support for the opposition.

#### **POST-1999 GENERAL ELECTIONS**

The 1999 elections results seemed to present a possibility amongst the people that the lifespan of UMNO would end at any time in similar accordance with several parties in the Asia region namely Congress (India), Golkar (Indonesia), Muslim League (Pakistan) and LDP (Japan). This was due to UMNO's failure in securing half of the total number of seats which they had competed for that was 72 out of the 148 seats which BN won in that election.

There were assumptions that other parties in the BN collaboration could alter UMNO and make UMNO the opposition instead if they were to unite in one voice, a forecast based merely on emotions. This was probably because since UMNO's participation in standing for elections, generally UMNO would emerge the winner with more than half the seats competed for by BN so much, till the formation of the icon the government is UMNO and UMNO is the government (Coruch, 1996), what more at the earlier stages, UMNO was seen as the core protector of the Malay race. Malay is UMNO and UMNO is Malay (Funston, 2000) was also another title given to the UMNO party. Nevertheless, the presence of a number of corporate members caused the party to seem to have lost its gusto as the party which stood by its ideology in order to develop the Malay race as this race was more interested in protecting and upholding their personal individual interests rather than the future of the race on the whole. UMNO was seen and used as a platform for them to plan and manage their businesses in order to become rich and continue becoming richer. This threatened and marred the Malay society's position as their majority was still under the level of quality lifestyle until the gap between them and the middle class as well as upper class remained wide (Embong, 2002).

UMNO's hegemony was challenged when its candidates votes declined drastically and their heavy weight candidate was defeated, especially several Ministers and Deputy Ministers as well as one Chief Minister. UMNO seemed to be in a hostile environment. Hence, began the process known as re-engineering and re-juvenate the party. This decline of votes in facts brought about its blessings. What they had failed to realize was that the loyalty to the party had begun to fade as days passed due to the changes in the nation's mainstream political climate.

UMNO which had been known as the defender of the Malay race was now considered irrelevant. There were those of the opinion that UMNO relied on non-Malay parties such as Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), United Traditional Bumiputera Party or Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak Native People's Party or Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), Malaysian People's Movement Party or Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) and others in the Allied party in order to continue its reign. Also, present was the attitude of political socialization amongst the government employees who seemed inclined to support the opposition parties.

All of these were seen as threats to the party's strength which all this while had maintained and upheld their position as well as sovereignty of the Malay race in

the government of Malaysia. Post-elections witnessed the rise of many requests and urge to restore the unity and strength of the party. The weaknesses were studied and gradual changes were made to ensure UMNO would remain as the ruling party which held the dominant role in the BN (Funston, 2000). Efforts was taken to guarantee that the Malay community realized that UMNO was a party which would always ensure that the position of the Malays would never be threatened. An autopsy was done to analyse how UMNO could have lost its fort and how to win the hearts of voters who had been disappointed by the party. About 76 representatives of the BN components in comparison with 72 by UMNO showed that UMNO was faced with its biggest crisis recorded in its history.

They went on to be defeated in Kelantan and most shocking, Terengganu was lost to PAS. Continuous research found that if UMNO did not do something, they would probably stand to lose Kedah, Perlis and Pahang to PAS, too. If the opposition was consistent with their image and was able to fulfill all the promises stated in their manifesto of the 1999 elections, they would probably threaten BN's achievement once again in the 2004 elections. This was because in Pahang of the 38 seats contested at the SLA level, PAS won 8 seats and lost in 11 seats to the BN candidate with a majority vote of <1000 votes. In Perlis, PAS won 3 out of the 15 SLA seats and by winning 5 more seats which they had lost <1000 votes, they could already form the state government. In Kedah, PAS won 12 out of the 36 SLA seats and 7 more seats were lost with votes of <1000 counts (Election Commission, 2002). The issue of Anwar's dismissal enabled the opposition to ounce on the sympathy of the people be it the young or the elderly. Each of them received alternative information and spread the news to everyone on their personal stance. The fate of the leader was determined based on feelings and emotions. Government employees used the government machinery to support the opposition's actions. The younger generation amassed all the information gathered from the internet as alternative information and brought this home in order to influence the older folks in their respective hometowns and villages. Such a practice pressured BN so much so that whatever was done by BN was labeled as a lie, a mistake and irrational.

The opposition party who succeeded in manipulating and using this current issue was PAS. The emergence of PAS which all this while was seen as lacking in strong machinery as well as limited financial resources caused a stir amongst the people that there was now an alternative party which would uphold the rights of the Malays (Noor, 2003). During that time, many UMNO party

members themselves had left the party and joined PAS till UMNO was seen finding difficulty in obtaining new members while PAS had no problems at all in gaining young and ambitious members (Noor, 2004). PAS emerged as the biggest winner in the elections. The combination of PAS with their parties such as KeADILan, DAP and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) further strengthened their movement's machinery. However not all collaborated parties in BA achieved excellent performance in the 1999 elections.

DAP for instance, faced terrible defeats among its main candidates though there were a few who won. On the other hand, KeADILan which was formed just after the dismissal of Anwar was considered a success based on the fact that as a newly-formed party in presenting a performance at par with parties which had long been established (Weiss, 2000). They gained strong support mainly in the Federal territory and Selangor indicating that support for Anwar was based mostly in the urban areas. Anwar became the party's idol and a planned reformation which was held throughout Anwar's early arrest was centralized on the party's active level in order to move and plan their strategy. The President of KeADILan, Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail won the Permatang Pauh seat which had previously been contested by her husband, thus becoming the most renowned member of parliament. ADIL which all this while had yet to receive any acknowledgement or support was now seen as a party which played a role of importance in the opposition collaboration party.

## **CONCLUSION**

Voting consist several factors in determining trends among voters or driving their support to a political party. In additional, the sentiment of uncertain voters may have worked in favour of the opposition coalition in the 1999 general elections. Several factors explained in this study operate according to the interest of the voters and has become instrumental in determining their choice.

Obviously, the voters decision centralized on importance given to certain issues compared to a specific issue. This study discussed the multi-dimension factors consist in Malaysians desire to vote and political sociologist will observe this as a change in the political culture itself created by leadership performance with the emergence of alternative media and civil society organizations.

However, winning two third majority shows that BN is strong and have operated an effective governance to be elected again because in studying electoral behavior any government with majority seats cannot be assumed weak.

The 1999 general elections may have indicate and created a new wave or national elections barometer to bring the prospect of change to the leaders and government in order to understand the sentiment among voters. Many factors can be related to voting trends and voters are no longer engaged to loyalty or to express gratitude to the ruling party solely based on development and prosperity. Voting consist no single factor and that was the signal given by the voters in the 1999 general elections.

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