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# EDGING TOWARD A NEW POLITICS IN MALAYSIA

## *Civil Society at the Gate?*

\_\_\_\_\_ Meredith L. Weiss  
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### Abstract

Activists from civil society contributed significantly to the strong performance of the opposition in Malaysia's March 2008 elections, strategizing opposition collaboration, standing as candidates, informing debates, and expanding media options. These efforts boosted the excitement of the polls and the opposition's odds, but they also pose new challenges for the future.

Keywords: Malaysia, elections, civil society, Barisan Nasional, Anwar Ibrahim

Conventional wisdom deems Malaysia's March 8, 2008, general election, the country's twelfth, a "political tsunami." As the results poured in, revealing unprecedented losses for the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim gleefully hailed a "new chapter" for Malaysia. Then-incumbent Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi lamented, "We've lost, we've lost," and his ever-crotchety predecessor, Mahathir Mohamad, cried for blood.<sup>1</sup>

The primary peninsular opposition parties—Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Parti Islam

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1. "Malaysia's Election: Political Tsunami?" *Economist*, March 10, 2008, at <<http://www.economist.com>>; "Malaysia PM Rejects Calls to Quit," *BBC News*, March 9, 2008, at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk>>.

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SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS)—posted remarkable gains. In 2004, the BN had capitalized on hopes for the still-fresh Abdullah, developmentalist promises, and a divided opposition to sweep the Dewan Rakyat, Malaysia's Parliament. The BN took 298 seats to the opposition's combined total of 21, plus all but one state legislature.<sup>2</sup> PKR was nearly wiped out, retaining just one seat.

Four years later, the BN's share of seats in the Dewan Rakyat plunged to 63%, its overall popular vote dipped to 51%, and four more state governments toppled. The historic opposition gains of 1999's Reformasi (Reform) elections, in which the BN lost two states and nearly one-quarter of the parliamentary seats, paled in comparison. And never before (with the possible exception of 1969, when ethnic riots and emergency rule muddied the final tally) has the ruling coalition ceded its two-thirds majority in Parliament.

Yet however startling the end result, it is the *process* by which that outcome was achieved that bears closest scrutiny. How the opposition worked to achieve its historic "victory"—since that is how the results have been read, despite the BN's continued majority control—suggests more than other indicators what to expect for the future and precisely where Malaysian politics has diverged (or not) from its past. Among the most important contributors to that process of framing a new political alternative and mobilizing the public around it was civil society.

Malaysian civil society is reasonably diverse and vibrant, despite tight restrictions on freedoms of assembly, speech, and the press. The sphere encompasses non-governmental organizations (NGOs, advocating for human rights, sustainable development, and more); mass-based movements (such as Islamist or youth organizations); religious and social groups (though clearly, not all are political in orientation); trade unions; public intellectuals and other unaffiliated activists; and alternative media (for instance, blogs). While use of the term "civil society" is of comparatively recent vintage in Malaysia, what it represents is not: many organizations of today build on predecessors dating back to the colonial period. However, the organizational density and complexity of Malaysian civil society has expanded dramatically since the 1980s. Its political engagement and impact have expanded apace, given policy advocacy and other initiatives its members have taken up. Most substantial among these campaigns have been efforts to liberalize politically and extend a range of civil and political rights, often with a left-wing perspective, and efforts at Islamization. However, groups from across both ideological subsets—liberal/leftist and Islamist—have allied fruitfully

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2. See Francis Loh, "Understanding the 2004 Election Results," *Aliran Monthly* 24:3 (2004), at <[www.aliran.com](http://www.aliran.com)>, accessed June 12, 2008, for a succinct overview.

over the years in issue-based networks. Moreover, particularly since the late 1990s, civil societal organizations and activists increasingly have been taking part in electoral politics, whether directly by joining or launching campaigns, or indirectly by offering intellectual ballast and models.

When we speak of civil society in the context of Malaysian elections, we refer primarily to an opposition force. Although the component parties of the BN—primary among them the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)—do have links with NGOs and their ilk, the opposition parties' ties are more substantial and meaningful. And although organizations and activists from civil society have played important roles in past elections, not least in 1999, those roles took on a new scope and scale in 2008. The participation in formal, electoral politics of such non-party (if not always nonpartisan) forces may offer new political possibilities by bringing the experience of civil societal initiatives to the table. In Malaysia, their involvement may (though need not necessarily) foster more issue-based rather than personalistic or identity-based appeals; promote cross-communal, cross-confessional campaigns; offer potential new leaders who lack the baggage of established politicians; boost expectations for accountability; and provide independent media to facilitate such public scrutiny.<sup>3</sup>

Activists from civil society arguably did all the above in 2008. These activists were pivotal in developing and articulating a vision for opposition collaboration over the course of the campaign, serving as candidates themselves and ratcheting up the excitement and quality of the campaign through protests, media events, and other activities. Such full-on engagement revisited and escalated past efforts at presenting a coherent alternative to the BN's "control" model<sup>4</sup> and has paid off by whittling down the incumbent coalition's dominance. Bit by bit especially over the past decade but on a larger scale in 2008, electoral activism outside established political parties has made a new sort of politics seem truly viable in Malaysia. This incarnation is less tied to communal interests, more participatory and open, and more critically self-reflexive. Still, such involvement comes at a potential cost, both for the formal political system and for civil society itself.

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3. Such roles are among those detailed in Meredith L. Weiss, *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

4. Government under the UMNO–MCA–MIC Alliance coalition, predecessor to the larger BN, more closely approximated a consociational model. While that label still tends to be applied to the communal order in Malaysia, a control model, which stresses the imbalance across partners and elements of coercion in the alliance, is more appropriate today. See Ian Lustick, "Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism versus Control," *World Politics* 31:3 (1979), pp. 325–44.

## The Results

Entering the polls, the BN knew it had its work cut out for it. Nevertheless, even then-de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was taken aback by the extent of the coalition's losses. Most estimates predicted a swing of less than 15%, 30–40 parliamentary seats. The end result was approximately double that, stemming from the backlash against a widely unpopular administration and also from protest votes that carried perhaps unintended weight. In the process, four ministers and eight deputy ministers were voted out of office. (The Women, Family, and Community Development Ministry fared especially poorly; all its leaders lost their seats, Minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil to Anwar's 27-year-old daughter, Nurul Izzah.<sup>5</sup>) At over 73%, turnout was slightly higher than in 1999, despite the fact that an estimated five million eligible voters, most of them Malay, failed to register. Even so, the "tsunami" was primarily confined to the north and major cities. Voting patterns remained consistent in much of the rest of the country. In all the states the BN retained except Negeri Sembilan, the coalition's control is overwhelming.<sup>6</sup>

The BN lost support across communities, but especially among non-Malays frustrated by perceived violations of minority economic, cultural, and religious rights. Desertions by Malaysians of Indian background were the most obvious and unusual. The community is small—just 8% of the population—but sufficiently concentrated in particular districts, primarily Perak, Selangor, and Penang, to make a difference. Indian support for the BN plunged from an estimated 82% to 48%. The MIC was decimated. All its top leaders lost their seats. Samy Vellu, party chief since 1981, lost to a candidate from the unregistered Parti Sosialis Malaysia (Malaysian Socialist Party, PSM). Chinese support for the BN fell even more drastically, from an estimated 65% to 35%. Both the MCA and fellow Chinese-majority BN party Gerakan were trounced; the DAP won more seats than both combined. Malay support, on the other hand, held relatively steady, declining by just around 5% to 58%. As a result, UMNO emerged more dominant within the coalition than before. Its share of the coalition's seats has increased from 49% to 56%. Moreover, the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak alone account for 40% of the BN's seats.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Dynastic patterns were clearly apparent. Among the victors were not just Anwar's daughter but also his wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail; Mahathir's son, Mukhriz; Lim Kit Siang's son, Guan Eng; and Abdullah's son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin.

6. "Making Sense of the 2008 General Election Results," *Malaysia Votes*, March 9, 2008, <<http://malaysiavotes.com/wp/>>, accessed June 12, 2008.

7. For a thorough examination of these voting patterns, see Terence Gomez, "Umno Still Strong in Malay Heartland," *Malaysiakini*, June 4, 2008, <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>. The statistics provided here are widely accepted estimates; given the lack of exit polls, precise

For their part, the primary opposition parties' comparatively modest aim was just to deny the BN its two-thirds majority. To boost their odds, they committed to contesting nearly all seats, without splitting the opposition vote. The opposition—especially PKR—fared best in urban areas, including in ethnically mixed seats in which the BN historically has had the advantage, amid widespread concern for rising prices, corruption, and crime. Yet, the Malay vote swung unexpectedly, too, in its “heartland” of Kedah and Kelantan, spurred by the BN's failed promises, continuing underdevelopment in the region, and factionalism in UMNO.<sup>8</sup> Public opinion data suggest that opposition (especially PKR and DAP) supporters were voting for change.<sup>9</sup> All the same, the DAP and PAS performed best where they have historically been strong, displacing broadly similar parties (the DAP versus Chinese-based Gerakan; PAS over the Malay UMNO). PKR, on the other hand, not only benefited from coordination with its fellow parties to emerge as leader of the opposition and form the government in Selangor but also presented a truly new face for a *de facto* Malay-based party. Of its 31 elected representatives, 20 are Malay, seven Chinese, and four Indian.

Opposition parties' euphoria mixed with anxiety as the scope of their gains became clear. Amid warnings of potential retaliation by angry BN supporters, the police and politicians urged restraint, including eschewing the sort of victory celebrations that so provoked the hotheads of 1969. The situation remained peaceful. The markets, too, were jittery. March 9 saw the Kuala Lumpur Composite Index's greatest one-day loss in years. Those worries also proved transient, or at least were outweighed in magnitude by continuing turmoil in global markets.

Overall, apart from Mahathir and several followers (who quit UMNO in a huff two months later over Abdullah's recalcitrance in remaining in office), the BN took the results largely in stride, even as Anwar schemed to lure enough East Malaysian members of Parliament (MPs) away from the BN to tip the scales in Parliament. The formation of state governments saw several hiccups, partly because of the unusual assertiveness of sultans.

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determination of individual-level voting behavior is impossible in Malaysia. Estimates for voting by ethnic group, for instance, are generally determined from the final vote tally and demographic breakdown at the lowest level for which results are available (usually at the constituency or polling station level).

8. Among the more trenchant early assessments of factors in the BN's decline is Bridget Welsh, “Election Post-mortem: Top 10 Factors,” *Malaysiakini*, March 12, 2008, <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.

9. The majority of BN and PAS voters, on the other hand, cited other motivations: party loyalty for the former and “Islamic and Malay rights” for the latter. Merdeka Center, “Peninsula Malaysia Voter Opinion Poll: Perspectives on Issues, the Economy, Leadership, and Voting Intentions,” March 14–21, 2008, <[http://www.merdeka.org/pages/02\\_research.html](http://www.merdeka.org/pages/02_research.html)>, accessed September 1, 2008, slide 45.

Such hurdles included Terengganu, where the sultan rejected Abdullah's choice of chief minister in favor of his own, as well as jockeying among opposition parties over state-level executive offices. Yet, all were soon up and running. Chinese-majority Penang—the prime minister's home state, led by Gerakan for the past 36 years—is now headed by the DAP, with a plurality of 19 out of 40 seats. The result in Kelantan, PAS-led for the past 18 years, is similarly straightforward: PAS won 38 of 45 seats, boosting its previous single-seat majority. PAS also secured a plurality in Kedah.

Control in Selangor is more divided, but PKR formed the government: it won 15 of 56 seats, while the DAP took 13 and PAS eight. Perak State is headed by a coalition government, even though the DAP took 18 of 59 seats, compared with PKR's seven and PAS's six. (The chief minister must be a Malay-Muslim, except in case of a waiver from the sultan; none of the DAP's representatives in Perak is Malay. The parties submitted one name each to the sultan and left the choice to him.) Opposition candidates won 10 of 11 parliamentary seats for the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (which lacks a state legislature), as well.

### Civil Society as an Electoral Force

Now that the polls are past, should promised reforms be effected, the initiative must rest primarily with political society rather than civil society. The opposition-controlled state governments have made it clear that change *is* in the offing. All have suggested they will pursue restoration of local elections (long a demand especially in heavily urban, and heavily non-Malay, Penang and Selangor). Penang's newly installed DAP chief minister was the first off the mark in moving to repeal race-based preferences and implement an open-tender system for state contracts. Yet, those ideas for reform and how best to pursue it owe much to the imagination and energy of activists and organizations from civil society, rather than just the parties themselves. Had such forces not been active throughout the campaign, strategizing, mobilizing, and throwing themselves into the fray, the elections would likely not have turned out as they did.

Although elections were due to be held by May 2009, most pundits anticipated an earlier date. Anwar Ibrahim, barred from contesting for four years after completing a prison sentence on charges of abuse of power but still charismatic and beloved, regained eligibility in mid-April 2008. In addition, the global economic downturn was only likely to get worse, making the government ever less popular. Even so, the time hardly seemed propitious. Inflation and unemployment were both high and rising, fuel subsidies had been slashed, foreign investment had slipped, and income inequality had soared to levels among the worst in the region. Corruption issues were especially

important, since Abdullah had breezed into office in 2004 as “Mr. Clean.” Alas, his administration failed to purge itself of scandals, from truly sordid tales of sex and murder to run-of-the-mill graft, to cases of massive fraud in connection with megaprojects like the Port Klang Free Trade Zone.

Racial and religious tensions had been simmering, stirred by several factors: non-Malays’ sense of socioeconomic marginalization, the destruction of dozens of Indian temples, a series of challenges to non-Muslims’ legal rights, and incendiary pro-Malay and pro-Muslim rhetoric. Even Mahathir proclaimed the need for a stronger opposition. Yet, even when previously matters looked dire for the BN, the coalition has pulled through with its two-thirds supermajority intact. This is sufficient to ratify constitutional amendments, as has been done over 40 times since 1957.

Opposition leaders are well aware that to make real inroads, their long-polarized primary parties—one Islamist and Malay, one secular-leftist and predominantly non-Malay, and the third somewhere in between—would have to overcome mutual suspicions and cooperate. Such a coalition would follow in the footsteps of concerted efforts at opposition cooperation since the late colonial period and Alliance<sup>10</sup> years, and especially in most elections since 1990. As those efforts had proved, deep cooperation after years of the BN’s occupying the broad middle ground, leaving other parties on disparate margins, is hard to organize and even harder to sustain. (In 1995 and 2004, for example, PAS’s emphasis on Islamization repelled the DAP; collaboration was impossible.) The year 1999 saw a breakthrough in the form of a heightened role for non-party activists in promoting opposition cooperation along that fragile middle ground.

Political parties have limited space to maneuver ideologically lest they alienate their core constituencies; those activists operating within civil society are less constrained. Whereas Malaysian parties have historically been largely communal in makeup, most often by design, significant civil societal campaigns have effectively crossed ethnic and religious boundaries by focusing on shared substantive concerns. Moreover, it is within civil society that important new agendas have been developed for export to the formal political sphere, from women’s rights and environmental conservation to approaches to Islamization. Innovation is being encouraged on numerous fronts: the very different incentives relevant to those not competing for votes or accountable to an electorate; the structuring of organizations primarily along issue-based lines; the geographic clustering of many civil society organizations and the flow of activists across them; the availability

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10. The Alliance was the immediate post-independent ruling coalition comprising UMNO, the MCA, and the MIC. The BN succeeded the Alliance after the 1969 elections, following a 21-month period of emergency rule.

of regional or global discourses and models; and crucially, independent media, much of it critical, innovative, and widely accessible. Such intervention was even more crucial this time than in 1999 as it capitalized on new framings, new grievances, and new technologies alike.

### A Proliferation of Platforms

Although official campaign periods tend to be short in Malaysia, ranging from 42 days in 1955 to eight in 2004, the run-up to the polls is a far more protracted process. Low-level groundwork lurches into higher gear as soon as Parliament is dissolved—this time, for a 13-day campaign. (Abdullah dissolved Parliament on February 13, 2008; nomination day was February 24, kicking off the campaign proper.) The most tangible marker of the shift in mode is the launch of manifestos by the BN, which presents a single document for its component parties, and its contenders. The year 2008 was no different: the BN glowingly (and in more detail than usual) flogged its record of achievements, backing these up with promises of development projects to come, including a hydroelectric dam in Kelantan. The major opposition parties each introduced key documents. PKR's manifesto was entitled "A New Dawn for Malaysia." The DAP kicked off a "Just Change It" campaign, and PAS issued a lengthy platform under the rubric of "PAS for All." Certain states warranted locally specific declarations (for instance, the DAP's campaign in Penang), and third parties or independent candidates likewise issued their own manifestos. The unregistered PSM, which ran four candidates under the banner of PKR, presented its own seven-point declaration and also endorsed PKR's.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, the three leading opposition parties recognized the imperative of collaboration, notwithstanding ideological and logistical difficulties. Their solution bore echoes of 1990. That year, a breakaway faction from UMNO reorganized as Semangat '46 (Spirit of '46, the year of UMNO's founding) served as a bridge between its erstwhile partners. Semangat allied with PAS in the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Muslim Unity Front) and with the DAP in Gagasan Rakyat (People's Might); PAS and the DAP had no direct alliance.<sup>12</sup> Much the same happened in 2008, although less formally: PKR campaigned with PAS and with the DAP, but the latter two parties made less of a show of joining forces, beyond putting in place elaborate arrangements to avoid three-cornered fights. Whereas Tengku Razaleigh

11. The gamut of manifestos is available from the Center for Public Policy Studies, at <[http://www.cpps.org.my/sub\\_page.aspx?catID=290&ddlID=291](http://www.cpps.org.my/sub_page.aspx?catID=290&ddlID=291)>, accessed June 12, 2008.

12. Precursors to that arrangement were the leftist All-Malaya Council for Joint Action and Malay-based Putera Tenaga Raayat (Center of the People's Power), which collaborated as two conjoined coalitions to present alternative "People's Constitutional Proposals" in 1947.

Hamzah, Semangat's leader, was the voice of the combined opposition in 1990, this time it was Anwar Ibrahim. The difference was that Anwar was not himself a candidate—which likely bolstered his legitimacy in rallying a cross-racial press against the BN.<sup>13</sup> Rattled by his somewhat unexpected clout, the BN lashed out with increasing fury against the “chameleon” Anwar, heir apparent to Mahathir a mere decade ago.

Where the opposition parties were hesitant or unable to press further, activists from civil society, beholden to no constituency, took the initiative. Human rights campaigner Yap Swee Seng explains that NGOs see elections as their chance “to push the civil society agenda and make their voice heard. . . . The ultimate objective is to ensure a strong, multi-party opposition that can better safeguard the constitution and people's interest.”<sup>14</sup> A group of bloggers and other activists led by human rights lawyer and blogger Haris Ibrahim organized as the “People's Parliament” (the title of Haris's blog<sup>15</sup>) to draft a “People's Declaration” (entitled *Harapan Rakyat*, *People's Hope*). It was accompanied by the “People's Voice,” a laundry list of issues in need of redress.

The declaration proposed a range of reforms to promote unity, democracy, judicial independence, a free press, transparency, accountability, equitable and sustainable development, support for small businesses and the poor, and more. It asked opposition parties to identify and cooperate “sincerely” as a cohesive *Barisan Rakyat* (People's Front, BR). They were urged to adopt the “People's Declaration” as a cornerstone of their manifestos and campaigns, draft a common BR manifesto and banner, and present voters with a coherent, united opposition coalition.<sup>16</sup> PKR, PAS, the DAP, and the smaller PSM, Malaysian Democratic Party (MDP), and United Pasok Nunukragang Organization (Pasok) all endorsed the document, though the DAP, at least, was at pains to stress that they had *not* joined the coalition.<sup>17</sup> Organizer Haris Ibrahim confirmed that “Barisan

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13. Anwar entered Parliament several months later, after winning an August 2008 by-election in his old constituency, Permatang Pauh, by a landslide. His wife vacated the seat for him.

14. Quoted in Baradan Kuppasamy, “Politics—Malaysia: Civil Society Leaders Enter Election Fray,” *Inter Press Service*, February 13, 2008, <<http://ipsnews.net>>.

15. Experiences such as disruptions to the “Article 11” initiative, a campaign for religious freedom with which Haris had been involved in 2006, as well as lawsuits against bloggers Ahirudin Attan (a.k.a. Rocky) and Jeff Ooi, inspired the blog. Shahanaaz Habib, “Fighting for the Right to Speak,” *The Star*, May 18, 2008, <<http://thestar.com.my>>. Haris subsequently joined the defense team for fellow *Barisan Rakyat* organizer and blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, charged with sedition in connection with his writings.

16. Peppering blog postings and the like regarding the BR initiative were references to the multiracial aspirations of American civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr.

17. “Malaysia: DAP Denies ‘Barisan Rakyat,’” *Sin Chew Daily*, March 6, 2008, <<http://www.mysinchew.com>>.

Rakyat” was not a legal entity or a pact among the parties but a promise by the signatories to the public to implement the declaration. This would entail forging such a pact, should the parties come to power.<sup>18</sup>

The document, process, and resulting coalition carried clear echoes of the Barisan Alternatif (BA) in 1999, a reformist opposition coalition comprising DAP, PAS, and PKR.<sup>19</sup> However, the BA’s manifesto, “Toward a Just Malaysia,” was drafted by the parties themselves, albeit with input from non-party activists. Indeed, in launching the “People’s Declaration” in February, Haris noted that the 2008 document was modeled on a comparable joint election manifesto prepared for the BA in 1999 but not made public.<sup>20</sup>

The “People’s Declaration” made manifest what was clearly implicit in the various parties’ platforms: a preference for and expectation of working in coalition, both in terms of rallying voters’ support for *any* opposition candidate and subsequently in government. As a citizen initiative and a document, however, it did not need to take the hard step of actually hammering out a power-sharing agreement among the parties. Still, however disparate they were, the parties’ own manifestos converged strategically on a core set of objectives akin to those laid out contemporaneously in the “People’s Declaration.” These were, however, tempered by differing weightings or spin. All the parties emphasized such issues as balanced development (lower gas prices, free education, a national health care fund); equal opportunities across ethnic groups; civil liberties and good governance; combating corruption and crime; and environmental conservation. Moreover, no party touted an exclusivist line. PAS spoke more in terms of a welfare state than an Islamic one, going so far as to present not just a record 13 female candidates<sup>21</sup> but its first non-Muslim candidate (although

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18. Haris Ibrahim, “Barisan Rakyat: We, the Rakyat, Must Lead the Way,” *The People’s Parliament*, March 13, 2008, <<http://harismibrahim.wordpress.com>>; also from the same blog, S. V. Singam, “Who Is Barisan Rakyat?” March 14, 2008. Terminology proved confoundingly slippery, though. Haris announced that the group would endorse a slate of candidates (bloggers and others) who would form a Barisan Rakyat but also that the Barisan Rakyat would rally support and pass a “cyber-hat” for those candidates online. Ahiruddin Attan, “Enter the Online Barisan Rakyat,” *My Paper* (Singapore), February 21, 2008, at <<http://rockybru2.blogspot.com>>.

19. PKR was then Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN or Keadilan). It became PKR upon merger with Parti Rakyat Malaysia in 2003. For details on the BA and 1999 elections, see Meredith L. Weiss, “The 1999 Malaysian General Elections: Issues, Insults, and Irregularities,” *Asian Survey* 40:3 (2000), pp. 413–35.

20. Soon Li Tsin, “Barisan Rakyat vs Barisan Nasional,” *Malaysiakini*, February 23, 2008, <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.

21. PAS declined to field female candidates for 30 years after the 1969 elections, breaking the trend (justified in terms of conditions on the campaign trail) only in 2004.

she ran under the banner of PKR, despite being fielded by PAS, since only Muslims can join PAS). The DAP touted multiracialism and advanced non-Chinese candidates, and PKR came out firmly against race-based discrimination. Indeed, all the parties emphasized minority economic, cultural, and religious rights, including reworking affirmative action policies and appointing non-Muslims to state government offices. Above all, all three parties stressed a message of change.

The need to formalize some version of the BR as proposed in the “People’s Declaration” in 2008 became immediately apparent. The three parties faced power-sharing in the states they were jointly to govern, particularly Selangor and Perak. Previously, collaboration had never had cause to move substantially beyond campaigns and elections, and only PAS had actually held power. (State governments do have real authority in Malaysia, including over land allocation, local services, and Islamic law.) Within about three weeks, on April 1, 2008, PKR, PAS, and the DAP officially joined forces in the *Pakatan Rakyat* (People’s Alliance). The coalition represented a new political phase, not just practically but discursively: it eschews the term “opposition” or “alternative,” presenting itself as a potential government and not simply a foil to the governing BN. Hence, too, the cachet of the term “Alliance” instead of “Front.” It remains to be seen how well the DAP and PAS will work together in the long term, although the *Pakatan* functioned better as a coalition in its critical first hundred days than many had expected, keeping Islamization largely on the back burner.<sup>22</sup>

### Campaigning Far and Wide

Civil societal involvement started well before the polls, though, and permeated the campaign process, in the form of issue-oriented coalitions and significant new media. Two distinct activist coalitions, the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) and *Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil* (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, BERSIH), set the stage with massive rallies in late 2007. Even Bar Council (the organization of the Malaysian Bar, which manages the legal profession) lawyers marched in protest in September over new evidence that judicial independence was compromised at the top (i.e., the “Lingam tape,” in which a well-connected senior lawyer, V. K. Lingam, plotted judicial appointments with then-Chief Justice Mohamed Dzaiddin Abdullah). The electoral impact of such events is unpredictable: despite significant non-Malay participation in Reformasi movement protests in the late 1990s, most Chinese and Indian voters stuck by the BN in 1999. This stemmed primarily from the particular mix

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22. Yet, in mid-June, PAS Youth announced plans to study how best to implement harder-line Islamic laws in *Pakatan*-controlled states, setting naysayers chattering anew.

of issues thrown up by the largely Malay-based movement. In this case, however, the protests and their suppression foregrounded widespread grievances and helped unite opposition activists. In particular, the vehemence of HINDRAF's complaints and the state's response (dispersing protesters with water cannon and teargas, detaining movement leaders without trial under the loathed Internal Security Act [ISA]), indisputably helped to mobilize Indian voters and sway them toward the opposition. Both factors also likely reassured other disgruntled non-Malays that their own grievances were valid. (At the same time, this campaign by and for Hindus served to demonstrate that organizations in civil society may be just as communal or otherwise exclusive as those in political society.)

For its part, BERSIH's campaign to clean up the polls reminded the public from the outset of endemic weaknesses in electoral integrity. The coalition asked for indelible ink to mark the fingers of those who had voted; abolition of postal voting (permitted for military, police, and teaching personnel posted far from their home constituency); equal media access; a three-week campaign period; and establishment of a post-election royal commission on electoral reform. The Election Commission (EC) conceded on minor procedural changes, including the removal of serial numbers from counterfoils of ballot papers, transparent ballot boxes, and the use of indelible ink to prevent multiple voting.

With days to go, and after spending MYR 2.4 million (\$684,000) on 48,000 bottles of ink from India, the EC reversed that last decision. The commission said that marking voters' fingers would unconstitutionally curb the right to vote and also cited a just-unearthed plot to smuggle in ink to mark unsuspecting citizens *before* they could cast their ballots. (The EC chief confessed in mid-May that he had been directed by Abdullah's Cabinet to cancel the use of the ink; Abdullah insists it was just a suggestion.) Several leaders of the independent Malaysians for Free & Fair Elections (MAFREL) withdrew as EC-accredited observers in protest; even the BN's MCA objected, and vandals splashed the EC head's house with red paint.

Meanwhile, responding to fears of "phantom voters," the EC acknowledged the presence of an improbable 8,666 registered centenarian voters, their ages stretching into the 120s, even after the purge of thousands of deceased voters from the electoral rolls after the 2004 polls.<sup>23</sup> BERSIH's complaints were not without merit: the elections brought the usual problems

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23. Issues such as the malapportionment of seats are less likely to be addressed, despite their clear impact: the smallest constituency has fewer than 7,000 voters and the largest, over 112,000; sparsely populated Sarawak, now so critical to the BN's survival, has more seats than any other state.

with contested candidate nominations, missing forms on polling day, voters registered or reassigned without their knowledge, questionable recounts, thuggish electoral tactics, and overspending by the BN.

Meanwhile, other civil society organizations joined the campaign frenzy. Several new initiatives were akin to past efforts in both substance and methods. The Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI), formed ahead of the 1999 elections to promote women's participation in public life, offered a 10-point platform, lamented the still-low proportion (8%) of female candidates, and put forward an independent candidate for Parliament.<sup>24</sup> Concerned over a seemingly secular trend, the Defenders of Islam coalition issued its own manifesto demanding stricter enforcement of *syariah* law and more aggressive promotion of Islam. Students and recent graduates strategized to launch a Malaysian Students' Party (echoing cognate efforts in 1949 and 1969, although this time complicated by restrictions on students' political participation under the 1971 Universities and University Colleges Act). Even normally apolitical Christian churches and organizations hosted debates and offered guidelines for voting.

Such initiatives helped not just to drum up interest in the pageantry of the campaign but to firmly fix the focus of candidates and voters on substantive issues. Testament to the high level of public interest in and engagement with the largely noncommunal, issue-oriented messages being flogged by the opposition parties were the enormous turnouts at their campaign events. In Penang, for instance, DAP/PKR *ceramah* (campaign rallies) drew stadium-filling multiracial crowds, totaling tens of thousands.

Perhaps most important, though, were the alternative media—a critical component of Malaysian civil society—which indisputably altered the atmosphere and outcomes of the campaign far more than ever before. Around 60% of Malaysians have Internet access (a level unusually high for the region); usage rates are higher among younger and more-urban voters, which likely helps explain the political swings within such constituencies. It is not clear whether the Internet had anywhere near the same effect in the “heartland” as in more multiracial, developed, and urbanized areas where the (non-PAS) opposition so exceeded expectations. *Malaysiakini.com*, a daily news site launched before the 1999 elections, served as a focal point in providing opposition-friendly news coverage. At least as important, it has encouraged and trained a growing clutch of critically minded young journalists over the past decade, fostering a newly vibrant media environment.

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24. The candidate, the late Zaitun Kasim, also represented the WCI in 1999, running under the DAP flag. She was forced to withdraw from the race this time for health reasons.

*Malaysiakini*'s dedicated election site alone registered over half a million visitors on election night.<sup>25</sup> Supplementing its coverage were a range of other local online news sites, plus blogs of candidates and observers alike. Clips were posted on YouTube showing everything from comic send-ups of BN politicians to video feeds of opposition *ceramah*. Also posted were Facebook groups supporting favored aspirants (and Facebook pages for those candidates), as well as substantially pro-reform international news services, including newcomer Al Jazeera, headquartered regionally in Kuala Lumpur, that were easily accessible online. Moreover, the Internet offered new revenue streams via online donations for opposition contenders on shoestring budgets, benefiting candidates like blogger Jeff Ooi.

The BN's campaign made far less use of the Internet, although component parties were not unaware of what they were up against. UMNO Youth, for instance, maintains "cybertroopers" to counter online "misinformation" and rumors, and a team from Gerakan monitors blogs to gauge popular sentiment.<sup>26</sup> For the most part, though, the BN relied as always on near-monopoly control of mainstream print, radio, and television media. Coverage was as heavily biased as ever in favor of BN campaign events and candidates, with dire warnings about alternate choices ratcheting up as the polls drew near. Indeed, one analyst suggested that the BN's tight leash may have been counterproductive: controls on mainstream media left many voters unaware of how well the opposition was poised to perform, so these voters cast their protest votes not expecting to be in such ample company.<sup>27</sup> Once the polls closed, not only were these media sluggish in reporting returns, but within days the press had launched into ominous tales of what life would now be like under PAS rule.

### Activists for Office

Even more startling than the participation of civil society-based activists in opposition politicians' campaigns was the presence of activists as candidates—and how many of them won. Opposition parties generally welcome these well-known, popular entrants, while the candidates in question

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25. "500,000 Visited Malaysiakini on Poll Night," *Malaysiakini*, March 10, 2008, <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>. Even so, in one recent poll, a minority of Malaysians—around 13%—ranked the Internet among their top three sources of election-related news. Within that cohort, *Malaysiakini* is the most heavily frequented portal. Merdeka Center, "Peninsula Malaysia Voter Opinion Poll," slides 20–21.

26. Lee Wei Lian and Toh Mei Ling, "New Value: Cyber Wars," *The Edge Daily*, February 25, 2008, <<http://www.theedge.com.my>>; Kasee, "Cyber Troopers Battle for Voters," *Malaysia Today*, February 17, 2008, <<http://www.malaysia-today.net>>.

27. Ong Kian Ming, "Making Sense of the Political Tsunami," *Malaysiakini*, March 11, 2008, <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.

see a chance to pursue the same goals they pursued through civil societal engagement, but by different means. In the words of longtime activist Zaitun Kasim, “We can’t leave politics to politicians . . . it is too important. . . . We campaign on issues that the mainstream political parties will not touch.”<sup>28</sup> These efforts, too, are not entirely novel. Part of what set 1999’s elections apart, for instance, was the influx of non-politicians into the race, including many of the same people who ran in 2008. The boundaries between civil society and (opposition) political parties have always been permeable, not least because those parties spend so much time out of office.

Yet, the ranks of activist candidates have grown substantially, and their concentration now in both state and federal legislatures is remarkable. A cohort of NGO activists (a few of them also active in opposition parties) launched campaigns, primarily under PKR. Among those who succeeded in their bids were long-time human rights campaigners Elizabeth Wong, Sivarasa Rasiah, Sim Tze Tzin, and Tian Chua (running for the third consecutive time and released just in time from detention on BERSIH-related charges). Others included critics of economic and education policies such as Charles Santiago and Tony Pua (also a well-known blogger); political scientist and labor activist P. Ramasamy (who defeated Penang Chief Minister and Gerakan leader Koh Tsu Koon); and HINDRAF leader M. Manoharan, elected while still under ISA detention—his wife campaigned on his behalf. Media activists in particular caught the public’s eye (and both inspired bloggers and worried authorities in neighboring Singapore<sup>29</sup>). Jeff Ooi, recently investigated for posts on his popular blog *Screenshots*, and Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, at 26, the youngest candidate in the race, ran *as* bloggers (Ooi with DAP; Nik Nazmi with PKR).<sup>30</sup> Even political neophyte Loh Gwo Burne, creator of the infamous “Lingam tape” won, based on that claim to fame, as did three other candidates connected with the tape, all under PKR. Meanwhile, the 2008 elections saw the first avowed socialists elected in Malaysia since the 1960s: PSM’s Jeyakumar Devaraj and Nasir Hashim, both long-time grassroots activists.

While it bears noting that the bulk of “NGO candidates” contested in urban areas (especially Selangor, the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur, and Penang), the presence of such new MPs carries broader significance.

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28. Quoted in Kuppusamy, “Politics—Malaysia.”

29. Alex Au, “Government Web-wary in Singapore,” *Asia Times Online*, April 24, 2008, <<http://www.atimes.com>>.

30. Making full use of the Internet and purportedly inspired by Barack Obama’s campaign in the U.S., Nik Nazmi even outlined his manifesto in YouTube videos.

First, the timbre and process of their campaigns, and the apparent extent of their popularity, suggest new trends in political participation and empowerment, including the politicization of younger voters via online channels and a growing climate of both critical and constructive discourse. Second, the entry of these candidates brings unjaded, issue-oriented voices to both state and federal legislatures. And third, their election signals a possible increase in the proportion of legislators in politics because of ideological commitment, rather than as a means to personal aggrandizement. As noted above, new MPs include both individuals like Tony Pua, who made a fortune early and retired in 2007 to devote himself to public service, as well as long-penurious activists like Tian Chua and Elizabeth Wong, who clearly have *not* been in it all this time for the perquisites of office (since there have been few).

### What Can We Expect Now?

However promising in terms of advancing promised political reforms, such engagement by civil society activists brings a potential cost, both for the formal political system and for civil society itself. For one thing, an uncommon proportion of MPs now in office have no real experience of politics or policy-making. Nor do their parties, in the case of opposition legislators, have stores of collective experience and resources with which to support them. Indeed, this particular concern extends beyond just the activists now in office. The 2008 elections saw an atypical number of first-time candidates across all parties, reflecting both turnover and a public yen for new faces. That freshness is undoubtedly an asset in terms of purging the system of crony networks. But it also suggests a longer-than-usual learning curve in the new federal and state legislatures, and perhaps the possibility of well-meaning but poorly designed or executed policies. There *is* expertise involved in policy making and governance more broadly. Stepped up training programs for legislators, as well as a less recalcitrant attitude among sore losers who could facilitate these transitions, might help. Still, prevailing economic travails have pressed the new MPs to hit the ground running.

In terms of civil society itself, there is no easy fix. Most obviously, civil societal organizations may feel severely their loss of expertise and experienced leadership, at least in the short term. More problematic in the long term is the risk of creeping partisanship (though clearly, antagonism toward the BN has long been pervasive). As John Dryzek warns, activists from civil society must weigh carefully the pros and cons of entering formal state structures. "A flourishing oppositional civil society is the key to further democratization," he insists. If too much of civil society is absorbed into the

state—too often entailing cooption, not true redistribution of power—civil society will be left too drained to remain an effective source of pressure.<sup>31</sup>

Checks and balances are already weak in Malaysia, diminished especially by years of executive centralization under Mahathir. Even should those activists now in office prove to be model politicians, the sort of democracy they themselves tout demands mechanisms for accountability. These mechanisms, such as they are, tend in Malaysia to hinge on voluntary efforts by social activists, and may thus be especially tenuous for now. A fair number of the best and brightest activists are now in government. Civil society in Malaysia is a relatively small, closely knit sphere, so it might be too much to expect those still on the outside to critique their long-time friends and colleagues too stringently. And yet that is exactly what they must do, if activists within civil society are to continue to help nudge the Malaysian polity toward ever-greater political inclusiveness, openness, and innovation. It is a positive sign that those involved with the People's Parliament initiative in particular moved promptly after the polls to initiate "Representative Watch Committees," linked to the *Citizen Think Tank* blog, to "help 'our MPs' function the way they are supposed to" and make sure "the new kids on the block . . . don't go the way of Barisan."<sup>32</sup>

However noteworthy the course of the 2008 elections, it was the sheer *scale* of civil societal involvement and opposition gains that was distinctive, not the mere fact of these roles and achievements. Electoral support for the BN waxes and wanes, largely in tune with economic indicators and new alternatives thrown up by factional splits.<sup>33</sup> Whether or not support for the opposition holds firm at the next polls probably depends less on idealistic appeals from civil society than on the various parties' performance in the interim. Developmentalism is not so easily superseded. Should the Pakatan Rakyat prove less effective at bringing development to the states than the BN is seen to have been—even if such impotency derives from the worsening global economy or the BN's withholding of centrally controlled funds—economic angst is likely to outweigh ideological hankerings for alternative voices and rotation in power.

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31. John S. Dryzek, "Political Inclusion and the Dynamics of Democratization," *American Political Science Review* 90:1 (1996), pp. 484–86.

32. Quoted in Shahanaaz, "Fighting for the Right."

33. In fact, a pre-election poll found that support for the BN first dipped below 50% only around the end of February. Responses suggest it was the conduct of the campaign—particularly the BN's "infighting" and "paralysis" versus the opposition's "discipline"—that really turned the tide. Merdeka Center, "12th General Elections: Observations on Issues, Voting Directions, and Implications," March 12, 2007, <[http://www.merdeka.org/pages/02\\_research.html](http://www.merdeka.org/pages/02_research.html)>, accessed September 1, 2008, charts 26–27, 34.

Moreover, contra the more optimistic among pundits, neither do the Pakatan's advances signal an end to communalism. The coalition's approach evokes the "Malaysian Malaysia" perspective of Lee Kuan Yew's Malaysian Solidarity Convention in the early 1960s, and of the DAP more recently. That vision is of a Malaysian identity defined less by ethnicity and more by shared civic nationhood. Implementation of this vision, though, is fundamentally communal, in the sense that it gives conscious attention to power-sharing among Malaysia's primary ethnic groups. Like the BN, the opposition surveys the racial composition of districts in divvying up seats to contest. And in a grateful nod to HINDRAF, the Pakatan Rakyat proudly counts heads to note that the new Parliament has three more Indian MPs than the old, despite the trouncing of the MIC.

And yet, this latest iteration of efforts to counter the BN model has made an irrevocable breakthrough. Designed after 1969 to preempt tensions by absorbing as much of the opposition as possible (ultimately, all but the DAP among the major players, although PAS eventually pulled out as well), the BN claims for itself the broad middle ground of Malaysian politics, forcing its challengers to the fringes. Merely finding sufficient common ground to unite the margins has posed at least as great a hurdle as countering the near-hegemonic BN's campaign machinery. These elections have proved the possibility of power-sharing along two paths. The first is between the BN and a second coalition across states and in a less-monolithic Parliament; the second is among the opposition parties finally forced to hash out their differences in ways that are more than theoretical. The current balance may mark a real stride toward constitutional stability, given how much more difficult any amendment will now be. Should the Pakatan Rakyat either fail to cohere or not live up to its more concrete promises, chances are that voters will decide their opposition vote really *was* just a protest vote, and swing back to the BN in 2013. But even then, the example of collaboration, the experience of governing, the permeation of civil society into the electoral sphere, and the validation of a sort of critical engagement and participation so long suppressed under BN rule will remain.