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Malaysian

Elections stolen: people power the answer

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Malaysia's ruling party managed to narrowly hold power in elections in May, but only as a result of a rigged electoral system and widespread fraud. Over 50,000 protesters expressed their anger at the result on the Wednesday following the elections in Kuala Lumpur, undeterred by police declaring the demonstration illegal. The elections were the closest in Malaysia's history, where the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN "National Front") has been in power continuously since independence from Britain in 1957.

The BN received 47 per cent of the popular vote against the opposition's 51 per cent, yet due to gerrymandering that benefits BN strongholds in rural ethnic Malay areas, BN won 133 seats out of the 222 seat-parliament, against the opposition's 89.

The Malaysian Socialist Party (PSM) contested four seats as part of an electoral alliance with the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR "People's Pact") coalition. Federal MP Dr Jeyakumar Devaraj retained his Sungai Siput seat. However, other opposition parties broke the agreement and ran against the PSM in the three other state seats, splitting the vote and delivering two of the seats to the government in the first-past-the-post race.

Besides the formal inequalities in the electoral system and the huge bias in government-controlled media; intimidation, violence, vote buying, "phantom voters," faulty indelible ink that permitted double voting and other cases of fraud were rampant.

The opposition is pursuing a legal challenge in 30 seats where it lost narrowly, but such cases rarely bear fruit against the ruling party.

Tellingly, the opposition trounced BN in urban areas. Behind this lies resentment among urban Malaysians at policies of racial discrimination and cronyism.

The strength of the opposition's polling in the cities can be attributed in part to the mass BERSIH mobilisations for free and fair elections, and revulsion at the police brutality that accompanied them.

The BERSIH protests over the past two years are a sign of the growing disgust at the venality of Malaysia's elite. The mobilisations raised the hopes of millions and contributed to the record voter turnout of 85 per cent. It indicates intense politicisation and Malaysians' confidence that real transformation is possible, with voters flocking to the opposition's rally cry of "ubah" (change).

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim rose to notoriety as a critic of corruption in former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's government. Sacked in 1998, Anwar was prosecuted on phoney charges of sodomy and jailed for six years.

He now vows to abolish all vestiges of racial discrimination and introduce assistance to the poor along with free education. But experience of opposition rule in state governments shows that while they might be less corrupt, they adhere to the same neo-liberal economic consensus as other governments.

Race, class and corruption

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BN leader Najib Razak described the opposition gains as a "Chinese tsunami" in an attempt to play on racial divisions. But the vote against the BN was seen across ethnic groups in urban areas—even though ethnic Chinese Malaysians are heavily concentrated here.

Racial tensions have loomed large in Malaysian politics for decades. A consequence of centuries of British domination was that independent Malaysia inherited a society that was racially segregated. Chinese Malaysians were resented in particular because of their over-representation in business.

Following bloody race riots in May 1969 a suite of affirmative action measures were adopted under the New Economic Policy (NEP), which discriminated against the ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities in access to higher education, government employment and business. Aspects of official racism have been watered down, but discrimination continues.

While the NEP was introduced to address the relative disadvantage of the ethnic Malay majority, its effect over the years has been to cement a Malay elite with preferential access to business deals and government positions, generating rampant nepotism.

Prime minister Najib Razak's party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which heads the BN coalition, remains committed to preserving privileges for ethnic Malays, and its members are primary beneficiaries of government largesse.

New York academic Meredith Weiss told the Financial Times, "Intra-ethnic inequality is startlingly high. There has been a lot of disproportionate access [to economic privileges] by the few. The underlining trend seems to be that interests are defined now by socioeconomic class rather than ethnicity."

Many of the government's opponents reject the efforts at racial division. "We are not Chinese, we are Malaysian," said one placard at the protest against the election result, in response to Najib's anti-Chinese comments.

It is the movement on the streets that now holds the key to taking forward the struggle for democratic rights in Malaysia.

From Solidarity.net.au.