

Democracy Takes a Thumping: Islamist and Democratic Opposition in Malaysia's Electoral Authoritarian Regime

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by Dan Slater

Malaysia's general election has produced an obvious and familiar set of winners. The long-ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), or National Front, romped to what Malaysians colorfully call a "thumping" victory, capturing nearly 90 percent of all parliamentary seats. Within the BN coalition itself, the clear victor was the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which scored huge gains at the expense of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (known by its Malay acronym, PAS). And within UMNO, the obvious winner was the new Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who cemented his position atop Malaysia's dominant political party.

But who among Malaysia's diverse opposition parties was the biggest loser? Conventional wisdom says PAS, the Islamist opposition party, which has expressed the desire to turn this majority-Muslim nation into an Islamic state. Not only did PAS lose 20 of its 27 seats in the national parliament; it lost control of the state government of Trengganu in a shocking rout, and only a series of favorable recounts left it in power in the state of Kelantan, its long-time political stronghold. Nor is PAS still the largest opposition force in parliament. Its 27-10 edge over the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) has become a 12-7 deficit. Meanwhile, PAS's coalition partner, Keadilan, formed in 1999 by followers of imprisoned former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, was left with only one parliamentary seat. This has prompted analysts to describe the party, its *reformasi* movement, and its jailed symbolic leader as "irrelevant."

It is thus PAS' setbacks, not Keadilan's, that have captured the lion's share of attention. Given the DAP's electoral gains, it would seem that it is Malaysia's Islamist opposition, and not its democratic opposition, that has been most thoroughly thumped. By soundly defeating PAS throughout Malaysia's Malay-Muslim heartland, the multiethnic BN is reported to have struck a mighty blow against Islamic extremism in Southeast Asia, a region increasingly represented as a "second front in the war on terror." As in Algeria or Pakistan, a semi-authoritarian regime's unfree and unfair electoral victory is perceived as the price of victory over political Islam. The BN may not be democratic, but at least it is not theocratic.

The implication appears to be that Malaysian voters are irrevocably trapped between BN authoritarianism and PAS Islamism. But this logic ultimately rests on three unwarranted assumptions: (1) that PAS presents a credible threat to Malaysia's tolerant inter-communal order; (2) that authoritarian measures are the best way to counter this threat; and (3) that PAS is the only viable political alternative to the Barisan Nasional.

None of these assumptions withstands basic scrutiny. First, PAS does not credibly threaten to overturn Malaysia's enviable record of multiethnic cooperation and religious

tolerance. This is true even if one adopts an utterly skeptical view of PAS' political and religious intentions. To be sure, the party remains unwilling or unable to back away from its pledge to install an "Islamic state." Since 9/11 and the untimely death of party leader Fadzil Noor in June 2002, PAS has seen its reformist image wane and its religious image grow.

That PAS is widely perceived as a Taliban-in-waiting is partly due to government scare tactics. Malaysia's array of authoritarian restrictions on speech, assembly, and publication also make it difficult for the party to publicize its opposition to corruption and repressive laws like the Internal Security Act (ISA) in a consistent, effective manner. But at times, PAS can fault no one but itself. Its refusal to let Keadilan's Syed Husin Ali contest a parliamentary seat in Kelantan, for instance, showed that PAS leaders cared less about his impeccable reformist credentials than what they saw as his insufficient religiosity.

Why should Malaysians be sanguine in the face of PAS' Islamist agenda? Not because they should necessarily trust PAS, but because Malaysia's electoral institutions and diverse population make a PAS seizure of power unthinkable. The party has no real chance of winning national power because its aim of creating an Islamic state is unacceptable to the roughly 40 percent of Malaysia's population that is not Muslim. Nor does it appear to be terribly appealing to most Malays, who would be the primary (or only) target of more stringent religious laws. When PAS excluded its aim to establish an Islamic state from its joint national manifesto with Keadilan, it was not being duplicitous, as UMNO insisted; it was simply facing political facts.

Ironically, PAS appears to recognize its inherent limitations far more clearly than its critics. In March's election, PAS contested only about one-third of the country's 219 parliamentary seats: not exactly the looming "green tide" it is often assumed to present. Although PAS wins state-level control in a handful of states from time to time, this brings it little real power in Malaysia's highly centralized political system. One can see this basic reality in the decision of the BN-controlled federal government to withhold oil revenues from PAS-controlled Trengganu, and to overrule PAS's proposed amendments to the penal code in both Trengganu and Kelantan.

One might surmise that these frustrations with federal (BN) supremacy would push PAS to prioritize the capture of federal rather than state power. But PAS officials told their coalition counterparts in Keadilan during the election campaign that they were more interested in competing for state seats than federal seats. It is not hard to see why. While a few states in the Malay heartland might be within PAS' grasp, federal power remains essentially an impossible dream. PAS may be a big fish in a few state ponds; but even when it held 27 federal seats, it was little more than a national *ikan bilis*.

In sum, PAS did not lose much because it did not aim to win much. The critical question for any election post-mortem is not *whether* PAS lost, but *what* PAS lost. For all the talk of the "decimation" of PAS, the Islamist opposition will persevere. Its grassroots network remains strong, and it retains a powerful social base in Malaysia's religious institutions.

Though the Islamic sphere in Malaysia is far less autonomous than in Indonesia, it provides a relatively safe harbor from state repression. PAS will put this electoral defeat behind it and resume cultivating its mass Malay base, relatively unmolested by the BN authorities.

The same cannot be said for Malaysia's democratic opposition. While the BN only really thumps the Islamist opposition on election day, it thumps the democratic opposition on a continuous basis. Consider the case of Keadilan. This multiethnic opposition party emerged after the sacking and imprisonment of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. He has now been in prison over 2000 days, sentenced by Malaysia's far-from-independent judiciary to 15 years on charges of sodomy and abuse of power. Even the BN-friendly Bush administration considers Anwar a political prisoner, as his incarceration was inspired more by his willingness to expose BN leaders' corruption than by any corrupt actions of his own. His detention has deprived Keadilan of its most charismatic leader and its only figure with sufficient gravitas and political skills to keep the party's various wings united.

Under the leadership of Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah, Keadilan has emerged as the only political party in Malaysia that enjoys both democratic credentials and active support among all three of the country's major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Since capturing power in Malaysia requires the mobilization of support across all ethnic and religious communities, Keadilan alone has the potential to challenge the BN's long-running monopoly on both multiethnic politics and political power.

The BN has responded by strangling Keadilan in its crib. Anwar's lengthy sentence is only the most obvious example. From June 2001 to June 2003, five other Keadilan leaders were detained without charge under the ISA. This hindered the fledgling party's efforts to recruit and organize mass support, while the DAP and PAS were comparatively unconstrained. As voting day approached, the BN-appointed election commission reversed its earlier stand that three Keadilan leaders appealing convictions for political crimes could stand for office. Their candidacies were quashed at the eleventh hour.

This pattern of repression belies the BN's claim that authoritarianism is necessary in Malaysia to prevent communal instability. PAS makes its appeals primarily on religious grounds, while the DAP gets most of its support on ethnic grounds (party leader Lim Kit Siang's denials notwithstanding). If communal tensions are the biggest threat to political stability in Malaysia, why does the BN focus its repression on non-communal Keadilan? Because the BN's *raison d'être* is not to preserve communal harmony, but to preserve its own power. So long as PAS remains anathema to most Chinese and the DAP remains unacceptable to most Malays, they will continue to get thumped in national elections. The BN can thus watch them organize between elections with serene composure.

Compared to PAS and the DAP, Keadilan is small, disunited, and weakly represented at both the state and federal levels. A series of Keadilan campaign rallies I observed in two suburbs of Kuala Lumpur during the frantic eight-day campaign provide a sense of why the BN is willing to be especially repressive to keep it that way.

The rallies were notable not so much for their size (audiences numbering in the low hundreds), as for their diversity. On a whirlwind night of five *ceramahs* [rallies] in the working-class constituency of Batu, party vice-president Tian Chua – one of the five Keadilan members recently jailed for two years under the ISA – unleashed fiery rhetoric against governmental corruption and repression, in fluent Malay, to predominantly Malay crowds. At a night market along Jalan Ipoh, dozens of Malay onlookers swarmed Chua and his Chinese campaign entourage, thrusting eager handshakes across Malaysia's most intractable communal divide. Later, in Taman Beringin, Chua remarkably elicited the biggest roars from the PAS-dominated crowd when he denounced his opponent's Gerakan party for neglecting and insulting Malaysia's *Indian* minority. It was hard to avoid the conclusion that Chua had been imprisoned because his message poses a threat to the BN's cherished monopoly on multiethnic politics, not because it threatens to undermine communal harmony itself.

Across town, in the more middle-class constituency of Petaling Jaya Selatan, Keadilan's Sivarasa Rasiah was running a very different style of campaign. While Tian Chua emphasized national issues, Sivarasa talked mostly local politics to his predominantly Chinese audience on a hard-to-find soccer field in PJ's Seksyen 3. If elected, he and his Keadilan party would fight for the restoration of local elections (abolished since the racial riots of 1969) and the legal conversion of leasehold land into freehold land. His biggest applause came when he denounced the declining quality of Malaysian public education – an issue related, but not reducible, to ethnic politics.

To say that Keadilan faces obstacles to mobilizing support on the basis of such non-communal appeals would be a tremendous understatement. The combination of targeted repression of Keadilan's leadership, more generic authoritarian restrictions on speech and assembly, and authoritarian media controls Vladimir Putin would covet, made Keadilan's recent electoral struggle an uphill battle extraordinaire. Rallies required police permission, allowing the BN to claim the best locations for its own campaign events. Reporters were rarely present to convey the party's message of "democratic pluralism" to the wider Malaysian public. And Keadilan's rudimentary public-address systems were no match for the BN's high-priced, ubiquitous advertising blitz.

Internal barriers to electoral success plagued the campaigns as well. After witnessing Tian Chua's Malay-language rallies amid predominantly Malay crowds, it was jarring to find that the hard-core volunteers at his campaign headquarters – those willing to work past 2 a.m. in a shabby, rat-infested office space – were all speaking Chinese. Malays could appreciate his speeches, but how could they join a campaign run entirely in Mandarin?

By contrast, Sivarasa Rasiah's campaign headquarters was a paragon of multiethnic politics. The three leaders of the volunteer operation were a Malay woman, a Chinese woman, and an Indian woman. Scores of volunteers passed through during the day, with no single community conspicuously better represented than another. But whereas Tian Chua's campaign was managed in Mandarin, Sivarasa's was conducted entirely in English, the language of Malaysia's educated professional class. At his nighttime rallies,

Sivarasa depended on a translator to convey his message to his constituency's Chinese majority. Both Sivarasa and Tian Chua lost by enormous margins, like most of their Keadilan counterparts around the country.

The inability of these campaigns to overcome both class and communal divides is testimony to Malaysia's history of "consociational" politics. Elites cooperate across ethnic divides in English, while the general population speaks a mother tongue and remains dependent upon their own community's elite to represent their interests. Overcoming this neo-feudal political pattern would be an intimidating task, even if state authorities allowed Keadilan to flourish unmolested. It is clear that the BN has no such intention. Malaysia's democratic opposition thus emerges from these elections much weaker than the Islamist opposition, even though the DAP and Keadilan combined have a handful more seats than PAS in the federal parliament.

In the final analysis, PAS and the DAP represent permanent political minorities that the BN confidently allows a bit of breathing space. In contrast, Keadilan's cross-communal support makes it a potential political majority. The BN strategically downplays the importance of Keadilan, and shrewdly encourages observers to view the opposition and PAS as coterminous. Neither Malaysian voters nor foreign commentators should accept this conflation at face value. Rather, they should see it for what it is: a ploy to ensure that the major force in the opposition is Islamist rather than democratic, and thus incapable of overturning BN rule.

Most Malaysians seem to fear Islamism more than they dislike authoritarianism. They might not feel secure in the recognition that PAS is a permanent political minority in Malaysia's multi-communal polity. After all, minority groups have been known to capture power in certain times and places, and run roughshod over the wishes of the majority. But we call such political systems dictatorships, not democracies. Here is where Malaysia's enviable electoral legacies exhibit their importance. So long as PAS remains willing to compete for influence via the ballot box (and it has never given any signs to the contrary), it will be more effectively stymied by Malaysia's remaining democratic checks than by its burgeoning authoritarian controls. Hard and frightening tradeoffs between Islamism and authoritarianism might characterize polities where Islamists credibly threaten to win power through electoral means, as in Algeria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. But in diverse and broadly tolerant majority-Muslim societies such as Malaysia and Indonesia, democratic procedures should not be seen as an avenue to an Islamic state; they should be seen as an antidote.

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