

Factors Driving the Resurgence of Minority Party Politics

M.J. Mohd Fuad, A.B. Junaidi, A. Buang, R. Katiman and S. Sivapalan

School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: The resurgence of minority political parties is a relatively recent world wide phenomenon that is gaining fresh interest in political studies. In Malaysia, after decades of struggle, minority political parties the *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS) and the *Parti Keadilan Nasional* (ADIL) had succeeded in overthrowing the Barisan Nasional (National Front) state government of Terengganu in the 1999 state election. The objective of this paper is to analyse the factors leading to this episode of the resurgence of the PAS and ADIL in Terengganu. Data were collected through questionnaire survey and field observations. The results of the study showed that six factors drove the resurgence of the Malaysian minority political parties, viz. (1) change of strategy; (2) skilful exploitation of leadership and economic crises; (3) appeal to young voters; (4) good track record; (5) complementary ideological platform and (6) electronic information and telecommunication technologies including the Internet. In conclusion, this particular resurgence of the Malaysian minority political parties was a manifestation of changing political struggles at the local level against what was perceived as repressive and unjust status quo mainstream politics. It would be very interesting to test again the veracity of these critical factors in the country's next general elections.

Key words: Minority • Voters • Election • Political Parties • Resurgence

INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of minority political parties is a growing worldwide trend as recent developments in America [1, 2], Korea [3], Turkey, Iran [4, 5] and Europe [6] testify. Factors triggering or sustaining the resurgence had been wildly varied and unique to each case. These ranged from regional skepticism as in the case of Poland's euroscepticism [7] to ethnocentric curricula as in the case of Indian tribes and Puerto Ricans in America [8]; religious struggle against a secular state as in the case of Singapore's Muslim minority [9]; candidates' good character as in the case of United State's congressional elections [10]; articulating marginality through music as in the case of Rebetiko in Turkey [11]; and the quest for recognition as in the case of the transnational politics of Turkey's Kurds [12].

Malaysia was no exception to this trend. The country held its 10th general election on 29 November 1999 to elect 193 members to the Parliament and 394 members to the state legislative assembly. The results marked a political watershed in the country's history with 'new

politics' in the offing [7-10]. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) lost unprecedented ground mainly to the opposition *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS) and *Parti Keadilan Nasional* (ADIL). It saw the first real serious challenge to UMNO by the Malay community and perhaps a first real crack in the edifice of Malay hegemony which underpinned Malaysian consociational politics [11, 12]. At least half of the country's ethnic Malays population voted for the opposition, the latter denied a shot at power only by the Chinese and other minority communities. For the first time *Reformasi*, the opposition's battle cry for political change, had led to the political galvanization of several new forces of Malaysian civil society quite unlike what had occurred in the past [13]. Its not just that the Barisan Nasional (BN) saw its majority trimmed or that the opposition took the state of Terengganu after 12 years of UMNO's rule and a number of prominent BN candidates lost their seats. What was really significant about the various outcomes of the elections was that they collectively marked a major shift in voter's political behaviour and the resurgence of the minority political parties.

Since the first general election of 1959, 43 political parties were formed in Malaysia. Half of them had a short life due to the lack of nation-wide support. Political parties which survived were those ethnic based political parties under the Alliance/ Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition. Three main component parties of the National Front were the *United Malay National Organisation* (UMNO), the *Malaysian Chinese Association* (MCA) and the *Malaysian Indian Congress* (MIC). The three minority political parties which formed the opposition line were the Pan Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), the *Democratic Action Party* (DAP) and the newly constituted Justice Party (ADIL). The aim of this paper is to analyse the factors leading to the resurgence of this minority political parties i.e. PAS and ADIL in the 1999 state election of Terengganu.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Background of the Opposition Parties

Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS): Parti Islam se Malaysia (PAS), or as it was known before 1974, the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP), is the main Malay opposition party. Its origins can be traced back to early 1947 from the Islamic socio-political struggles in the early years of this century that sparked off the first phase in the awakening of Malay nationalism in Malaysia [14]. The Islamic group activists indicated their distrust of the secular UMNO leadership. In 1951, the association held a meeting in the state of Penang and passed a resolution converting itself into a religious Islamic welfare movement called Persatuan Islam Sa Malaya (PMIP), later known as PAS [15] and independent of UMNO. In its formative period, PAS relied upon the support of students and teachers in the religious schools, where the young Malays were instructed in the tenets of Islam. Subsequently its support was obtained from young, better-educated Malays in the urban areas and those in the professional occupations in contrast to its traditional local leadership and religious teachers rural and religious base of support. Many of them were activists in the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM).

PAS's main appeal was religion, but it also placed a great deal of emphasis on its claims that the Malays were the only 'true sons of the soil' [16] and that 'Malaya belongs to the Malays'. The party's slogan: "Bangsa, Uagama, Tanah Ayer" (Race, Religion and Land) became a powerful symbolic appeal. The party wanted Malay rights extended and entrenched enshrined in the Constitution and demanded the establishment of an Islamic theocratic state. There was the view that the

policy of the government should be more exclusively geared to promoting Malay welfare [17].

The PAS was regarded by many as a hard-line Malay Islamic party deriving its support mainly from the most conservative and most fanatical of the Malay Muslims. Its support was essentially rural and mostly found in the predominantly Malay states in the North and north-east of the Eastern Region of Peninsula Malaysia. Its membership totals up to 250,000. Its principal stronghold was in the state of Kelantan and Terengganu.

Prior to the 1978 general election, the PAS leadership made a surprising remark that the party would arrange an electoral pact with the DAP. It was unexpected given the fact that the two parties had a different philosophies and political ideologies. Consequently PAS suffered a major defeat in the 1978 general election. In the 1986 general election one of the PAS leaders announced that the "Malay Special Rights" would be abolished if the party won its election. As a result, in the 1986 election PAS representation was almost denied in the parliament. It won only one out of 99 parliamentary seats contested and this was the worst performance since independence. In the late 1980s, a new group of younger and more pragmatic leaders led the party. Prior to the 1990 general election PAS formed an electoral pact with other minority parties under the banner of Muslim Unity Movement (*Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah* or APU). Eventually the coalition was extended to include the DAP but due to ideological differences the DAP did not formally join the APU coalition. The PAS commitment to establish an Islamic state was viewed by the DAP leaders as incompatible with their dedication to principles of religious freedom and their demand for equality for all citizens.

Parti Keadilan Nasional (ADIL): Parti Keadilan Nasional (ADIL) or The National Justice Party was formed on 2 September 1998 following the dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim. Malays' outrage at the way Anwar was treated sparked the reformation (*Refomasi*) movement. Hence the formation of ADIL with Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Ismail proclaimed its president. ADIL championed a new non-communal approach to Malaysian contemporary politics and quickly became the platform for Malaysia's 'new politics'. It demanded accountability and transparency in government, freedom of the judiciary from political interference, the abolition of undemocratic and repressive legislation and social justice. It called for the repeal of laws that violate or curtail human rights like the Internal Security Act (ISA), the official Secrets Act, the Printing, Press and Publication Act. It fought for the end of corruption and nepotism.

The *Reformasi* movement led by ADIL leadership immediately won the support and backing of large numbers of rural and urban Malays, Chinese and Indians from all walks of life. The support also came from the professionals, social activists and non-government organization (NGOs). During the election, ADIL, PAS and Democratic Action Party (DAP) formed an alliance called the *Barisan Alternatif* (Alternative Front). They succeeded in reaching agreement on the allocation of electoral seats and the content of a joint manifesto 'For a Just Malaysia' which defined what the new non-communal politics of *Reformasi* was all about.

Location of the Study Areas: The eastern Peninsular Malaysian state of Terengganu was characterized by relative isolation and had a predominantly Malay population. It also represented the traditional area in the country where religious leaders exerted a great deal of influence in social and political life. It had a population of 898,825 (2000) comprising of 96.5 per cent Malays, 2.8 per cent Chinese and 0.7 per cent Indians and others. Some 48.7 per cent of its population lived in urban areas and most of the non-Malay population concentrated in two towns - Kuala Terengganu and Kemaman. Since the discovery of oil in early 1980s, Terengganu had experienced a drastic socio-economic change. Its average household monthly income rose from RM694 in 1987 to RM1113 in 2000 while its poverty rate dropped from 36.1 per cent in early 1980s to 23.7 per cent in 1995. Its unemployment rate also decreased from 7.4 per cent in 1990 to 4.6 per cent in 2000. Timber, crude palm oil, crude petroleum and liquefied natural gas were the main sources of state revenue.

The Malaysian political constituency was delineated in 1959, 1974, 1984 and 1994. These delineations saw the total number of seats in the House of Representatives for Terengganu increased from 6 to 8 and that of the State Legislative Assemblies from 24 to 32 seats with a total of 387,339 registered voters for the 1999 general election. Both parliamentary and state constituencies were Malay dominated and had been the bastion of UMNO since 1978 ruled by the BN coalition party. But in the 1999 general election PAS managed to overthrow the BN state government and won seven out of eight parliamentary seats (one seat won by ADIL) and 28 out of 32 state seats. This was a significant improvement from one parliamentary and seven state seats it won in the 1995 general election.

Data Collection and Analysis: The primary method of data collecting was questionnaire interviews with voters and key political leaders and administrators in the two

parliamentary constituencies of Kuala Terengganu and Hulu Terengganu as respondents. The objectives of the questionnaire and interviews were to gather factual data from respondents when no other source for obtaining the required information was available. A total of 1033 Malay, Chinese and Indian respondents was administered questions on personal background, socio-economic status, perceptions and views on political parties and elections. The questionnaire survey was conducted by eight trained enumerators. The survey findings were then coded and analysed descriptively with the SPSS.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the survey analysis of the 1999 general election gave the following six reasons for the resurgence and ascendance of the minority parties in the Alternative Front: Firstly, PAS' change of strategy. Instead of wooing the rural Malay votes PAS focused on the urban Chinese. PAS leaders believed that if they could convince the non-Muslims particularly the urban Chinese, of the sensibility of its struggle, they could get some support from the Chinese voters who seemed very open and willing to change party affiliations. In this election PAS was fielding candidates all over because it wanted to win as many seats as possible in order to spread its influence as a party of integrity with an ideology based on Islam.

Secondly, the *reformasi* movement and the establishment of ADIL had led to a severe erosion of the Malay support in Malay majority areas. Winning five parliamentary and 11 state seats [20] ADIL received 11 per cent of the total vote and came close to defeating BN in a number of seats. In the urban constituencies of Kuala Lumpur they lost to BN on a thin margin of less than five per cent. Underlying this unprecedented turn away of the Malay voters from the UMNO was the dismissal and incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim. It had divided the majority of Malay voters in Terengganu and this manifested itself in the number of seats won and votes gained by PAS and ADIL. The Anwar saga had galvanized ex-UMNO and various NGOs' supporters into massive public rallies and street demonstrations. In Terengganu this had resulted in a resounding mandate for the PAS as representative of the Alternative Front.

Thirdly, the appeal of the PAS among younger Malays as a new pull factor in favour of the Alternative Front. Younger Malays were increasingly enchanted by the credibility of the PAS' version of Islamic governance. They were convinced of the ability of this Islamic version to build a truly meaningful civil society. They were able to shed and transcend the fear factor that UMNO used to capitalise in portraying the PAS' Islamic government as

backward and barbaric as they found PAS' explanation and clarification of the strict Islamic laws of *hudud* reasonable and sensible. The survey results showed that 63 per cent of the respondents voted for PAS because of its Islamic identity and 64 per cent because they wanted a new state government.

Fourthly, good track record. To be sure, this Islamic appeal of the PAS was not only a matter of promise made during an election campaign. It had much to do with the party's track record in governing the state of Kelantan, Terengganu's neighbour. In the last 12 years of PAS administration, the state of Kelantan had charted remarkable achievements. It managed to repay a substantial amount of the state's outstanding debt to the Federal government (incurred by the previous UMNO government) in spite of being financially discriminated against by the Federal government. The period of PAS' rule also saw the coming of more investors from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Austria and Singapore. While the Malays had learned about the sensibility of the *hudud* laws to find them acceptable, the non-Muslims had no reason to resist as they were not affected by them.

Fifthly, complementary ideological platform. For the less religiously inclined, ADIL provided the appeal of a party determined to bring in good governance, rule of law as opposed to the BN's rule by law, participatory democracy and justice for all.

Finally, the role of alternative media especially the Internet and cell phones had proved effective in counterweighing the BN's grip on traditional information and communication media. This had sped up the popularity of PAS and ADIL. The internet and other electronic access to the opposition newsletters, *reformasi* websites such as the *Malaysiakini.com.*, *Free Malaysia* and *Malaysia Today*, the online foreign newspapers and magazines and satellite private news channels such as CNN and ASTRO had demolished the barriers of information to the voting public and in turn influenced their thinking and voting decision. The study showed that 10 per cent of the survey respondents consistently used internet as alternative sources of political information and viewpoints. The result was enough to topple the BN candidates when complemented by PAS widespread, efficient, relentless and hardworking grassroots machinery.

CONCLUSION

Change of strategy, skilful exploitation of leadership and economic crises, appeal to young voters, good track record, complementary ideological platform and electronic

information and telecommunication technologies including the Internet had led to the 1999 victory of minority political parties in the Malaysian state of Terengganu. All in all, the resurgence of the minority political parties in this particular episode of the Malaysian political development was a manifestation of changing political struggles at the local level against what was perceived as repressive and unjust status quo mainstream politics. It would be very interesting to test again the veracity of these critical factors in the country's next general elections.

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