

Democracy in Malaysia: Governance and Balance

Ho, Khai Leong (何启良)

Humanities and Society of science Academy , Nanyang Technological University ,
Singapore

Although the political tsunami of the March 18 2008 Elections in Malaysia did not remove UMNO from power, it nevertheless shook the one-party system in Malaysian politics that had been its foundation for the past 51 years. As long as the political protests and public discontent continues to grow, the first regime change in Malaysian politics since its independence no longer seems impossible. The scene seems to have been set. With the overwhelming momentum gained by the People's Alliance, a credible performance by the state governments which they control will certainly swing popular support further in its favor, and present a direct attack on the central government. Nevertheless, there are worrying signs in Malaysian politics. We have to ask the question so often raised in the context of Taiwanese politics, and that is, "Is the opposition ready?" The anxieties and bizarre twists in Malaysian politics we have seen in the past year has been due to the Malaysian government's inability to deal with the current political situation. The opposition coalition, which has neglected the question of consolidating the long-term foundations for democracy in its impatience to supplant the ruling coalition, is also partly to blame. Political parties often assume that the people's vote meant an unquestioned mandate for their respective agendas. Such an attitude, however, will inevitably have negative consequences for the system of democracy in the country.

Until 2008, the growth of the political opposition, based on ideological struggles and racial consciousness, as well as religious divisions in the Malay community, had been a long and tortuous process. Nevertheless, it had remained a latent force, with broad scope of activities. Although it had often been successful in the city and state legislatures, it had never been able to threaten the central government. This is due to the support of the Malay community for UMNO. The *Reformasi* or reform movement so active in Indonesia in the late 1990s, began to spread to the peninsula. Together with the strengthening of civil society, the growing importance of multiculturalism, and the impotence of the national government, there was a growing sense of alienation and marginalization among the non-Malay communities, with members of the Malay community also beginning to see the government as corrupt and decadent. The inner fissures within UMNO grew, and created the conditions for the revival of fortunes for a noted Malay leader. The convergence of these factors created the current Malaysian political situation. What seemed like the swelling of a tide of democracy also carried within it the hidden danger of growing irrationality within this tide. This was the allure of Malaysian politics today, namely that it attracts but arouses suspicions about its underlying nature at the same time.

The real possibility of regime change makes it necessary to inquire further into the likelihood of the ruling party losing power and the actual strength of the opposition coalition. The circulation of political parties in power is part and parcel of the democratic system and process. Nevertheless, it remains a trying time for Malaysia. The distribution

of power and resources that comes with the coming to power of any political party is of great consequence. It is both a matter of policy and of governance. Needless to say, the outcome is of great consequence to the long-term development of democracy in Malaysia. This paper attempts to explore this development, the governance principles of the government-in-power, and the strategies of contestation adopted by the opposite, as well as several issues and themes associated with the history of the democratizing process.