

Malaysia after GE-15: 'A Government with No Direction'

Friday 17 February 2023, by [ARUMUGAM Sivarajan](#), [SKANTHAKUMAR Balasingham](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2023).

Malaysia's 15th general election (GE-15) on 19 November 2022 resulted in no single political coalition commanding a majority in the 222-seat federal legislature. It took almost a week, after intense backroom negotiations and the intervention of the constitutional monarch, for Pakatan Harapan (PH—Alliance of Hope) led by long-time opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and including the social democratic Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamist reformist Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH—National Trust Party), to form a 'unity and stability' government, with the support of his old and bitter rival Barisan Nasional (BN—National Front), along with two East Malaysian formations. At the centre, there has been political instability, with three different governments led by three different prime ministers, between 2018 and 2022.

Sivarajan Arumugam, Secretary-General of the Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM—Socialist Party of Malaysia), spoke with B. Skanthakumar in Kuala Lumpur on 27 January 2023 on the general election; the PSM's participation in that campaign; its assessment of the new government; and the PSM's plans in the months ahead.

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There were a number of surprises in the GE-15 result: the decimation of the Alliance/Barisan Nasional (BN) that had dominated government between independence in 1957 and up to 2018 [1] ; the failure of Pakatan Harapan (PH) to secure a simple majority despite the public outrage over grand corruption in government; and dramatic gains for the conservative Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS—Malaysian Islamic Party). What is your reading of these developments?

Sivarajan Arumugam: Shortly before the general election then opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) led by Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR—People's Justice Party) performed badly in a number of state elections, which were won handsomely by the party of the incumbent prime minister. However, in GE-15, the PH emerged as the single largest bloc with 82 seats; although far short of a simple majority in parliament.

Two surprises from the result are: the Barisan Nasional - which had done so well just months before and dominated Malaysian politics for decades with a two-thirds majority - had its worst-ever performance; and that the Perikatan Nasional (PN—National Alliance) - led by the Malay chauvinist Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU—Malaysian United Indigenous Party) - and particularly its constituent Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS—Malaysian Islamic Party) did so well, including outside its traditional stronghold.

This new PN coalition vote grew from disenchanted BN supporters and first-time voters from the

majority Malay community. Many liberal commentators have understandably been alarmed by the electoral share of PAS, interpreting it as indicative of Islamist radicalism among young rural Malays. PSM thinks that the choice made by the majority of these new voters was shaped by disappointment over the corrupt practices of Barisan Nasional that their community had traditionally supported; and uncertainty as to whether PH, the other opposition alternative, would uphold Malay privileges. The messaging by PN reinforced these sentiments, with wide use of social media (especially TikTok) to propagate race-baiting [directed against the ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities].

There was a vote of protest against BN, rather than an endorsement of PN. This was what we picked up in our grassroots political work among the Malay community. We observed that even though many voted for the Malay chauvinist PN, they don't necessarily share the extreme fundamentalist ideas of its leadership. The Malay masses want to ensure their 'rights' are protected, rather than harbour hatred against the non-Malays.

What was the PSM's participation in this election campaign?

The PSM is a small party. 2008 was our breakthrough year, when we secured one seat in parliament representing Sungai Siput; and one seat in the Selangor State Assembly representing Kota Damansara. We lost the state seat due to coalition problems in 2013; but held onto the parliamentary seat until 2018. Compared to previous elections, in GE-15 the opposition was very crowded with multiple parties and coalitions. There was disunity within the opposition such that a common candidate could not be presented against the ruling Barisan Nasional, leading to 3, 4, 7, and even 10-cornered fights in some constituencies. This fragmented the opposition vote to the advantage of the incumbent.

In this context, the PSM was in no doubt that a win would be difficult. Our goal was to achieve some progression as compared to the past, for a better foundation for the next election. Secondly, we also wanted to focus on non-traditional areas for the PSM: to develop new contacts, fly our flag, and raise our profile.

We selected one parliament seat (Rembau) in Negeri Sembilan state; and one state seat (Ayer Kuning) in Perak state. Both our candidates are locals, born and bred in those areas, with wide networks. We have been working with communities in these electorates for some time now, which is why we chose to stand as a means to strengthening our base there.

In comparison with other political parties, the PSM raised issues which they did not. The main theme of the PH coalition was the focus on government corruption, and to promise to jail dirty politicians. We highlighted the core issues of common people like affordable housing, environmental problems, health-care, workers' rights, etc. We organised media conferences outside hospitals to draw attention to the lack of facilities. Similarly, we exposed longstanding local environmental issues. As a percentage of the vote share in the election, we could not secure more than one to three percent; but we were received well by the people, which is more important to us. We will continue to work with the people in these areas.

The PSM tried to reach a pre-election agreement with the PH. Why, and what happened?

In early 2022 in preparation for GE-15, we conducted discussions with civil society organisations (CSOs) in several states like Johor, Penang, and Selangor. We asked them what they expected of PSM in the upcoming general election. While they appreciated our political ideas and grassroots work, they were frank that a vote for the PSM was not in their view useful - as we are not part of a national coalition that can bid for power across the country. So, rather than waste their vote, they preferred to support an opposition force that had a real chance of winning against Barisan Nasional

and forming a new government. The CSO perspective was that PSM should discuss an electoral pact with Pakatan Harapan to minimise splitting the opposition vote.

The PSM has been clear since the formation of Pakatan Harapan (PH), that it has no interest in joining that coalition as a permanent partner, but only to have an electoral pact before polls. There are too many political differences: PH is pro-capitalist, although described by some as centre-left. Our interest in negotiating with PH was to avoid contesting in seats where they were standing candidates, and for them to do the same where we stood. So, we began exchanging communications with PH along these lines, which initially appeared to be fruitful. However, to our extreme disappointment, and at the very last moment, PH said that the seats we requested could not be allocated to us – and worse, no other seats were offered to us.

What we then did, was not to contest in the five or six seats that had been requested – where PH selected its own candidate – and instead identified two other seats, that were previously not in play. Although PH had not been fair and reasonable to us, we did not want to contest in the seats under negotiation. This would have been seen as sour grapes. We sacrificed the constituencies where we had a good base and which were advantageous to us. Instead, we stood in two seats held by the government, where there was no PH incumbent. It should be clear from this experience that PSM did its best to satisfy the expectation of our allies and partners; which has been dishonoured by PH.

Following GE-15, the new PH government is now governing Malaysia in coalition with Barisan Nasional, principally its leading constituent the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), with a two-third majority in parliament. Two months on, what is the character of this new government, and what is your assessment of its direction?

Shortly after the new government was formed, PSM described it as one without direction. Usually before an election there is a manifesto, which can be a point of reference once a government is formed, to point out the promises made. However, the ‘unity’ government of Pakatan Harapan and Barisan Nasional is not based on any pre-election common programme nor a memorandum-of-understanding, that sets out its plans in government. Instead, what exists is a post-election agreement on how to manage the alliance and divide positions in government. The people don’t know what is the direction of this government, which is a combination of contradictory ideologies and political backgrounds. This is a question that we keep posing to the new government: “what do you stand for”?

It was only on January 19 that Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced his ‘Malaysia Madani’ vision – based on six pillars: sustainability, prosperity, innovation, respect, trust and compassion. These are vague ideas without specific policies or programme. We have yet to see what this means in practice. When we look at his Cabinet of Ministers, we have no confidence that others in his government are committed or capable of applying these values. The Prime Minister has his own thinking, but cannot apply his ideas across the coalition.

In the previous Pakatan Harapan government (2018-2020) there were good people, but they were not nominated to contest this time around. Some of the ministers who have been appointed this time have no background in their subject areas, which makes them dependent on bureaucrats who are no better than employers’ when it comes to workers’ rights.

Let’s take the minimum monthly wage that was recently raised to RM1,500 (USD352). This new minimum was to apply to all workers across the board. But recently its implementation has been postponed, following lobbying from employers’. Instead, the government is now going to bring 500,000 foreign workers, probably from Bangladesh and Nepal, where their employers will be given an exemption to pay minimum wages for six months. Of course, this will negatively affect the market

wage rate for local workers.

Another example, the Ministry that was formerly in charge of housing, had a national policy to increase access to affordable housing. But in this new government, that Ministry has dropped housing from its title and is now known as the Ministry of Local Government Development. Housing is now subsumed by 'development'. The approach of the new Ministry is to look at housing from the perspective of consumerism, de-emphasising it as a human right.

What are the PSM's plans in 2023?

In May 2022, we launched a five-pillar programme: (1) Empowering Social Security; (2) Job Guarantee Scheme; (3) Housing as a Human Right; (4) Reinforcing Public Healthcare; and (5) Immediate action to tackle the Climate Crisis. We have developed specific policies under each pillar (online [here](#)). The main campaigns in 2023 will be for a guaranteed monthly pension for all those over 65 years of age. We will launch this with a signature campaign during the upcoming [Hindu] festival of Thaipusam. Another campaign will be for abolition of the contract work system within the public sector. Our front organisation Jaringan Pekerja Kontrak Kerajaan (JPKK—Government Contract Workers Network) and the National Union of Workers in Hospitals Support and Allied Services will lead this struggle - and beyond the healthcare sector into other public services. There are also campaigns on food security and job security. There are state elections in Negri Sembilan, Selangor and Penang expected in mid-2023. We are considering standing in these three states. These elections provide a platform for us to promote the party and its ideas. We hope to make gains in Selangor where we have a long record of grassroots work.

The PSM has recuperated the concept of Marhaenism in its political work. What does it mean, and why have you done so?

Marhaenism is a Malay-language word with roots in Indonesia during the Sukarno-era. Instead of restricting ourselves to the term 'working class', it incorporates the popular classes who are at the centre of our political programme, and is a better reflection of the communities of the poor with whom we work.

It is a rationalisation for why the PSM which is a left or socialist party is present among non-proletarian classes of indigenous peoples, farmers, the self-employed, small business operators etc., and takes up issues of housing and so on, which are not related to workplace conflicts. These are groups that do not mobilise on the basis of the relations of production, but rather as members of affected communities, for e.g., on land rights, housing, environment, food security, etc.

We develop solidarity among these diverse groups - who do not organise as wage workers nor have a working-class consciousness - as well as with the working class, by using the broad term 'marhaen' as short-form for the working people. By using this concept, we find that we can organise more widely and in larger numbers. Hence in 2022, we brought together the peoples' movement that we lead, formerly known as JERIT (Jaringan Rakyat Tertindas/Oppressed Peoples' Network) as Gabungan Marhaen - an alliance of poor communities, workers, unions, non-governmental organisations, leaders and activists.

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B. SKANTHAKUMAR

P.S.

- IVP. MONDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2023:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7986>

Footnotes

[1] Danielle Sabai, 2 April 2009, ESSF (article 13427), [Malaysia between change and political tension](#).