

South East Asia

Malaysia between change and political tension

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The elections of Saturday March 8, 2008 represented an earthquake in Malaysian political life. The ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) and its main party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) suffered their most significant electoral defeat since independence in 1957. The coalition, which until then had held 198 of the 220 seats in parliament, only won 127 and lost control in 5 of the 13 states of the federation. It was a significant victory for the opposition, the Pakatan Rakyat (PR, People's Alliance), putting an end to the 2/3 majority held by the BN for 40 years which had allowed it to pass any laws it wanted in parliament. It is also a sign that Malaysian society aspires to profound changes.

The Malaysian social contract

A legacy of British colonisation, the organisation of Malaysian society is on racial if not racist bases. Different groups, in particular the Malays, Chinese and Indians (the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia representing respectively 60%, 25% and 8% of the population) live in a quasi separate manner with their own neighbourhoods, schools, stores, clubs and so on.

During colonisation, the British brought tens of thousands of Indians to Malaysia to work in the hevea plantations and tin mines. The Chinese came freely, poor migrants from southern China, but the community enriched itself to the point where today they control the essence of the country's commerce. During decolonisation, the British negotiated citizenship for the Chinese and the Indians in exchange for advantages given to the Bumiputeri, the sons of the soil, in their great majority Muslim Malays. Malaysia became a constitutional monarchy, the throne being shared in turn by one of the nine hereditary sultans of the peninsula. Malay customs were at the heart of the construction of the federation and Islam became its religion. The UMNO was, from independence, the party of the interests of the Malay community, who dominated political life, and consequently the main force of the country.

In 1969, the electoral alliance led by the UMNO suffered a significant electoral setback. Race riots

broke out, opposing the two main ethnic groups — the Malays and the Chinese. These events began on May 13, 1969 and ultimately led to the end of the government of the Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who represented the old Malay aristocracy, to the profit of the representatives of the emergent Malay capitalist class.

These events constituted the beginning of a new page of the history of the country during which this new capitalist class established its power, notably through the initiation of the New Economic Policy or NEP. The repression and climate of terror against non-Malay peoples after the riots allowed the imposition of this policy favouring only one of Malaysia's components. Since this period, the spectre of race riots has allowed the UMNO, and its youth wing in particular, to intimidate all movements for civil rights [1].

Malay supremacy

At the end of the 1960s, the Bumiputeri only possessed 2.4% of company shares, the Chinese community possessed 27.2% whereas more than 60% were held by foreigners. Started in 1971, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was presented as a policy with the objective, through positive discrimination, of redistributing wealth equitably, eradicating poverty inside all communities and forging national unity.

The Bumiputeri, mainly confined to agriculture and with an educational background and economic situation much inferior to that of non-Malays, in particular the Chinese, were the main beneficiaries of the measures implemented concerning access to the land, the recruitment of civil servants, the obtaining of licences for certain trades, scholarships, access to housing and so on. These measures were supposed to be temporary but in 1990, the NEP was replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP) whose spirit did not differ from that of the NEP, then in 2000 by the National Vision Policy (NVP).

The various positive action measures would effectively allow the emergence of a Malay middle class. But this policy became synonymous with Malay privileges and fashioned an increasingly open racist ideology.

The supremacy of the UMNO found its expression in the racist concept of Ketuanan Melayu, "Malay dominance". Parallel to this, ever more repressive laws were put in place to ensure this supremacy and strictly control an ever more profoundly divided society [2]. They would serve an authoritarian state whose main objective was rapid economic development. Under the rule of Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister from 1981 to 2003, the concept of the "Asian model" was elaborated and developed. Neoliberal measures favouring investment were introduced, accompanied by very restrictive labour legislation. Meanwhile, political pluralism was perceived as a threat to political stability and economic interests as more important than individual rights. In the name of economic development, the courts were stifled and "Asian values" opposed to human rights equated with "Western values". Freedom of expression was seriously limited, all media strictly controlled by the government. Repressive laws on internal security, media, sedition, state secrets, universities, religions and inter ethnic relations allowed a strict control of individuals and organisations.

Tensions between communities

Whereas all surveys and research show that the objectives of the NEP have long since been attained, no government wishes to challenge these "statutory privileges" and the special position of Malays

inside society. This policy of “acquired privileges” has contributed to worsening the tensions between communities. The Chinese no longer wish to pay for the privileges of the Malays and feel constricted in the areas of access to banking credit, public employment and education. In November 2007, Indians revolted against the second class status allotted to them in terms of citizenship. Since 1950, the date of Malaysian independence, the government has shown little concern with the difficulties of the Indian community and has left the destruction of Hindu temples (motivated by land speculation) unpunished. Rather than taking into account the demands of the Indians who revolted for the first time in the history of the federation, the government reacted with force by arresting the leaders of the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), organiser of the demonstration of November 25, 2007. Since then three leaders have remained detained in the context of the Internal Security Act (ISA) which allows unlimited arbitrary detention without trial [3] of any person convicted of threatening state security.

As to the Malays, not everyone has the luck to be well connected and profit from the manna. The NEP has not allowed all Malays to enrich themselves. Malay peasants have remained relatively poor. The NEP has rather contributed to creating a caste of business men influential inside the UMNO and profiting from state contracts. Business and politics are closely linked and the advantages drawn from the NEP are very largely used by the members of the UMNO to win Malay votes, enrich themselves personally and firm up their position inside the party.

The social movement

The opposition to the BN emerged following the protest movements of September 1998, called “Reformasi”. The imprisonment of Anwar Ibrahim, then vice-prime minister and president of the UMNO, led to powerful mobilisations then the creation of a front of opposition to the ruling coalition, the Barisan Alternatif (BA, Alternative Front). This coalition included the main opposition parties, the Parti Se Islam Malaysia (PAS, Malay Islamic Party), the completely new Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People’s Justice Party), led by Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Anwar’s wife and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a Chinese based party.

Unleashed by the fall of Anwar, who opposed the measures taken by Mahathir to save friendly enterprises from the debacle caused by the crisis of 1997, the Reformasi movement demonstrated a powerful desire for democratic changes and more justice in Malaysia. The demands of the demonstrators also reflected the desire for a real political pluralism. This movement did not lead to the fall of Mahathir, but it did lasting damage to his reputation and undermined his grip on power. During the general elections of 1999 which followed the economic and financial crisis of 1997 and the Reformasi movement, the BA succeeded in sapping the influence of the BN and the UMNO, in particular in its electoral bastions, namely the rural states with a Malay majority. The loss of influence of the UMNO led to a resistance to Mahathir even inside the party and to his retirement in 2003 (after 22 years in the post of prime minister) to the profit of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the current prime minister.

Political alternation

The elections of 1999 opened a political period of challenging of the racial organisation of society and showed a desire by Malaysians to win democratic advances. That was reflected in particular by a political alternation at all elections since 1999.

In 1999, the UMNO lost its title as champion of the Malay cause, acquired from its constitution in

1946. It was the PAS, an ultra-conservative Islamic party, and not the Parti Keadilan Rakyat de Anwar which constituted in the eyes of the Malay electorate an alternative to the UMNO and emerged victorious from the elections. This victory was short lived because the PAS suffered a reversal of fortune at the following elections in 2004. What the leaders of the PAS had taken for an acceptance of their pro-Islamic policy was probably only a way for the Malays to show their disenchantment in regard to Mahathir and his policies [4]. The electoral success of the PAS in 1999 had however as its consequence that the UMNO sought to counter it by progressively mixing an Islamist discourse with the traditional nationalist discourse of the party. In fact, while the main disputes were until then essentially of a cultural and ethnic order, the use by the UMNO of religion to political ends contributed to poisoning relations between the different confessions and strengthening the weight of Islamic law on Malays of the Muslim confession.

In 2004, one year after the resignation of Mahathir, his successor Abdullah Badawi won the parliamentary elections by promising notably to fight corruption and to favour more transparency and democracy. These promises have remained at the level of speechifying and no attempt to change the different anti-democratic laws like the ISA or to favour the freedom of the press has taken place. Abdullah, a not very charismatic prime minister, was also disavowed inside the UMNO — and in particular by Mahathir who had chosen him as successor — and at the elections which followed in March 2008.

The elections of 2008 were marked by the most significant electoral reverse ever recorded for the ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional and its main party the UMNO. The BN won 52% of the vote against 60% in 2004. For the first time in 40 years, the BN lost its 2/3 majority in parliament which allowed it to amend the Constitution at leisure and to push through whatever reforms it wanted without debate or opposition.

So as to gain votes the government had promised all sorts of gifts to the different communities: more scholarships for peasants and the most deprived Malays, increased expenditure for infrastructures in the villages, the creation of two million jobs in five years. The government had promised funds for Chinese schools and land for Indians for the reconstruction of destroyed temples. It reaffirmed its will to maintain the NEP in the face of demands for reforms from the non-Malay communities.

The desire to break with the management of the UMNO was, it seems, stronger: the opposition won the elections in the industrial states of Penang, Perak, Selangor and in the capital Kuala Lumpur. Malay voters also showed their disenchantment with the UMNO which supposedly defended their interests: in the peninsula, half of the Malay voters opted for the Pakatan Rakyat (PR), an opposition formed for these elections by the three main opposition parties (the PAS, PKR and DAP) [5]. The PAS won the elections in the states of Kedah and Kelantan (this state had been governed since 1990 by the PAS).

The Return of the “Mahathir system”?

Since the elections of March 2008, new partial elections have taken place and have been won by the opposition. These electoral reverses, as well as the political instability inside the UMNO, contributed to strengthening a current and forced Abdullah Badawi to withdraw at the next party congress in March 2009. His successor at the head of the party, Najib Razak, took over the position of Prime Minister at the end of March 2009 because the leader of the UMNO automatically becomes the chief official of the Barisan Nasional, the majority group in the Assembly and consequently Prime minister.

The accession of Najib to power seems to show that far from taking on board the message of the

voters — demand for transparency, integrity, competence, justice — the UMNO could return to an autocratic system as at the time of Mahathir [6]. This could well deepen the gap between the UMNO and Malaysian civil society as Najib is associated with corruption [7]. In January, manoeuvres brought about the defection of members of the state parliamentary majority in Perak, led by the opposition, and the formation of a new government loyal to the Barisan Nasional. This took place with the complicity of the Sultan of Perak who authorised the constitution of a new government led by the BN whereas the number of parliamentarians for the PR remained equal to that of the BN after the defections. Recently, the BN has again sought to discredit a member of the state assembly of Selangor and advisor of the PR by circulating photos of her asleep and naked on the internet. These photos, although taken by a former boyfriend unbeknownst to her, were a bombshell in this conservative country and have obliged her to offer her resignation, which could lead to new elections. There are many examples of such manoeuvres. All means are good to reconquer the powers lost at the ballot box and silence the opposition led by the charismatic Anwar Ibrahim.

Meanwhile the Pakatan Rakyat seems to be an alliance of convenience and the differences between the parties are considerable. Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat is a multiracial party whereas the PAS is an Islamist party advocating Sharia law, and the DAP represents the interests of the Chinese community. Their main points of agreement are the necessity of changing the system of management imposed by the UMNO for the past 40 years so as to combat corruption and the peddling of influence and to break with a social system based on racial privileges. Differences, notably on the religious questions between the PAS and the DAP, have not stopped the coalition parties from governing together in the states won in March 2008 and following policies more respectful of the people. The Pakatan Rakyat benefits moreover from being new to power; its members are not worn down by it or enmeshed in corruption.

The Parti Sosialis Malaysia

Malaysian politics has been dominated since independence almost exclusively by racial and communal logics. The policy of "Malay dominance" has not benefited the Malay Muslim community as a whole but mainly the ruling coalition and its networks of big Malay entrepreneurs. The Abdullah government has sharpened the neoliberal policies initiated by Mahathir. The global economic crisis has not spared Malaysia and unemployment is growing. The exploitation of Malay workers is no different to that of the Chinese and Indians of Malaysia. The economic questions, the class struggle, until now eclipsed by racial questions like the constitution of an Islamic state, could well come to the forefront. That is the task the Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM -Malay Socialist Party) has set itself. Set up in 1994, after the Malaysian left had completely disappeared since the end of the 1980s, the PSM has succeeded in implanting itself among the popular layers. Its main objective is "The PSM's main task is to unite the different races into a working-class movement to win the war against capitalism." [8].

Since its constitution, the PSM has led struggles in the context of coalitions notably against the privatisation of hospitals, against increased fuel prices and against the war in Iraq. It is the only party to wage a struggle against the free trade agreements between Malaysia and the United States. Up until last year, the PSM had not obtained legal registration despite a 10 year legal battle. That is why during the elections of 2004 and 2008, the party ran under the banner of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat of Anwar. During the elections of 2008 two members of the party were elected. Dr. Jeyakumar, a member of the central committee of the PSM, won a seat in parliament against an eminent member of the ruling coalition, the minister for labour. Dr. Nasir Hashim, president of the PSM, won a seat in the Selangor state assembly. It is the first time in 40 years that socialist representatives have been elected to Parliament or to a state assembly. Although running under the

banner of the PKR, the PSM campaigned with its own material and around its own programme. The election of the two comrades is above all the result of a real activist implantation among the plantation workers, the poor of the cities and the industrial workers.

Since its registration, the PSM has worked with the Pakatan Rakyat on a minimal basis: No to the Barisan Nasional! It supports the demands for suppression of the NEP, abolition of the ISA and all initiatives favouring the workers. Inside parliament, Dr. Jeyakumar is part of the opposition but not bound by any decision which goes against the interests of the workers or the socialist principles to which he adheres. The election of two of its members has been a formidable trampoline for the PSM which is now established in 7 of the 13 states of the federation and claims around 10,000 members in its committees [9]. One can only rejoice at such developments on the left in Malaysia and wish the PSM well in strengthening itself.

P.S.

* Translation from the French by International Viewpoint.

Footnotes

[1] For more details see "Racial Conflict in Malaysia : Against the Official History", Kua Kia Soong, *Race and Class* 2008; 49; 33.

[2] See on the ESSF site, Kim Quek, [Touching the heart of Malaysian Race Relations](#)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article11966>

[3] On the human rights situation in Malaysia see Alice Nah, [Human rights in Malaysia under international review](#)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article12926>

[4] See Khadijah MD Khalid, Voting for Change? Islam and Personalised Politics in the 2004 General Election. In *Politics in Malaysia — The Malay Dimension*, Directed by Edmund Terence Gomez (Routledge, 2007).

[5] The Barisan Alternatif, in opposition to the Barisan Nasional during the 1999 and 2004 election, dissolved itself after the DAP left the regroupment.

[6] See Jean-Claude Pomonti : Sclérose et changement : réflexions sur une gestion. In *EDA* n° 6. January 2009.

[7] He was also implicated in a scandal on the murder of a feeble Mongol translator in 2006.

[8] See on ESSF S. Arutchelvan, [Socialism is here to stay in Malaysia](#).

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article6878>

[9] For more, the website of the PSM is <http://parti-sosialis.org>