

Dilip Mukerjee

I. The Prime Minister, Priorities and the Parties

The resounding victory won by the ruling coalition in the Malaysian general election of April 1982 was -- as even opposition leaders conceded -- a personal triumph for the prime minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. After succeeding without contest in June 1981 to the presidentship of the United Malays National Organisation, the mainstay of the coalition, he wanted a popular mandate. Having obtained this convincingly, he has been working ever since to strengthen UMNO at its roots to meet future challenges. He is at the same time trying to make sure that the volatile Chinese voters, concentrated in urban areas, continue to support the Chinese parties in the coalition. His endeavour is to convince these voters that they do not need to hedge their bets by sustaining the role of the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) as a pressure group.

In relation to UMNO, Dr. Mahathir's priorities are two. One is to nourish its Islamic roots to keep the party in tune with the world-wide Islamic resurgence, the benefit of which has to a large extent been monopolised until now by groups like the Islamic Youth Association of Malaysia or ABIM as it is popularly known by its Malay acronym. In theory, this is a non-political organisation but in practice its extremely successful recruitment drives on campuses have aligned many of the ardent Muslim youth with UMNO's principal rival for Malay votes, the Islamic party PAS. Dr. Mahathir co-opted ABIM leader Anwar Ibrahim as an UMNO candidate just before the election, but of even greater significance is the subsequent elevation of Mr. Anwar as the leader of UMNO's youth wing following a closely fought election in September 1982. Dr. Mahathir and his senior colleagues took the formal position that they were taking no sides in the contest but the fact that he had personally brought the Islamic activist into the party and made him a deputy minister specifically in charge of Islamic affairs was a clear enough pointer to his personal preferences.

Dr. Mahathir's second priority with regard to UMNO is to curb the abuse of power in its higher echelons. After 25 years in office, the party has tended to become a power machine with little of the vigour which sustained it in its

early days. With men of questionable probity in top places, it has been an easy target for evangelists like ABIM and for critics like DAP and PAS. During the election, the Prime Minister tellingly demonstrated his determination to cleanse the party by signalling that five out of ten UMNO chief ministers of the states were being replaced. The encouragement given to exposures by the media, and the steps taken on the administrative plane to investigate malpractices were further pointers. As he said, he might not be able to eliminate corruption altogether but he would do everything he could to make wrongdoers weigh carefully the risks they ran. The immediate benefit to UMNO and the coalition was evident from the outcome of the election, his anxiety that the gain should not be dissipated means that the clean-up will continue with benefit to the party's image. In other words, Dr. Mahathir as the first ideological president of the party is seeking to bring about UMNO's renewal to enhance its appeal to an increasingly educated and articulate Malay electorate. This is probably what the historians will see as one of his major-term contributions to the Malay polity.

The other contribution that historians may wish to pick out is a remarkable change in his approach to the problem of restructuring the economy to bring about a better balance in the racial distribution of incomes and wealth, still highly skewed in favour of Chinese immigrant citizens. As the author of a 1970 book, *The Malay Dilemma*, in which he flayed the then UMNO leadership for failing to do enough to promote racial equity, his Malay credentials are beyond challenge. But the same man is now putting increasing emphasis on collaboration between the two communities and pressing for joint initiatives by them.

His book had made a plan for collaboration too but it was addressed exclusively to Chinese businessmen. Now he is telling Malays (or Bumiputras, sons of the soil) that it is in their interest to enlist Chinese support. The Malay Chamber of Commerce and its Chinese counterpart are in the process of forming a Sino-Malay council. An even more startling development is that the apex Bumiputra institution, created by the government two years ago to accelerate Bumiputra ownership in the corporate sector, is being asked to join hands with the apex Chinese holding company (sponsored by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a partner in the ruling coalition, to undertake challenging tasks that either cannot singly handle.

This reorientation seems to be prompted by a pragmatic recognition that the world economy will continue to be sluggish in the 1980's, making it more difficult for export-oriented Malaysia to sustain the rapid growth of the last 20 years. The Prime Minister is constantly talking of the need for greater efficiency in all spheres to meet the challenge. He is still committed to giving Bumiputras preferential access to economic opportunities -- as sanctioned by the country's constitution -- but he wants the enterprises created as a result to have the benefit of Chinese business acumen and skills. The motivation behind this new approach is economic but it may yield political dividends as well as the Chinese find new opportunities opened to them through the partnership concept. It is too early to say what impact the new approach will have on the fortunes of the MCA or Gerakan, the other Chinese partner in the ruling coalition. Both declare their support for official measures for racial restructuring under what is known as the New Economic Policy, introduced after the traumatic communal riots of 1969 which almost led to the collapse of the entire political system. But the *raison d'etre* of both parties is their championship of Chinese minority rights in relation to education and economic opportunities.

In terms of images, the MCA is regarded as a more ardent champion than Gerakan. The latter came into being in 1968 - 19 years after the MCA's birth - with a sophisticated charter which aimed at drawing support from all communities for what was intended to be a non-communal party. Although the very limited Malay support it started with was soon lost, making the party as Chinese in character as the MCA, the Gerakan has continued to take a more moderate stand on issues sensitive to the Chinese community. Although it has picked up some support elsewhere thanks to defections from the MCA caused by its persistent internal wrangles, it remains a Penang-based party in control of the state government since the 1969 election. It took the field at the time as an opposition party, and achieved resounding success by ousting the MCA from power in Penang and denying it any seats in the local assembly. The feud between Gerakan and the MCA smoulders on, although the former has since 1972 been an ally following its entry into the ruling coalition.

The MCA, as the first and largest Chinese party, is constantly harping on the need for Chinese unity. The slogan is, in effect, a call to the community to rally behind the

party to give it the strength to uphold Chinese causes within the ruling coalition. There are three factors which undercut this appeal to unity, the main one being the charge made by the DAP from the opposition that MCA leaders are too keen to share the spoils of power via the ruling coalition to jeopardise their position in it by standing up for the community. MCA leaders themselves concede that they suffer from what a former president called a "psychological disadvantage" because partnership in the coalition bars them from speaking sharply on communal issues. While conceding this, they answer the DAP's rhetoric by arguing that the community's interest is best served in the delicate give and take of Malaysian politics by a whisper from the inside rather than shouting from the outside - as the DAP has to do.

The second disability of the MCA is its image as a party of towkays, Chinese businessmen. This is partly because of their dominance in leadership echelons, and partly because the MCA devoted little attention in the past to the problems of the poorer sections of the community. Notable among them are the residents of the "new villages" in which Chinese rural folk were compulsorily regrouped during the 1948-60 battle against communist insurgency, the workers in industry and petty traders or self-employed artisans in the cities.

The MCA has lately recognised how vulnerable it is to the DAP among these handicapped segments, and has sought to do something to change the image by organising a cooperative movement, setting up constituency service centres to handle local and individual complaints and problems. Even so, the MCA is at a disadvantage in urban areas vis-a-vis the DAP which as an opposition party can afford to play up local grievances.

The MCA's third handicap is its legacy of factional disputes. It is either between those in and out of power, or between the English-educated and Chinese-educated members of the community who form two distinct segments separated by divergent economic interests and cultural ethos. The in-fighting at the top was particularly severe in 1973, and again in 1977 when the party was holding its biennial election. On that occasion, a candidate gained the number two job by defeating the party president Lee San Choon's nominee, but the winner eventually had to pay for his success. He was denied the party's nomination in 1982 for the parliamentary seat he held, and has subsequently been

eased out of the party. This shows that Mr. Lee - in office since 1975 - has now consolidated his position to an extent that there is little scope for dissidence. This makes the MCA a more cohesive but narrower political instrument.

For the 1982 election, the MCA decided to make Chinese unity its main theme, and this was dramatised by Mr. Lee when he pitted himself at considerable personal risk against the DAP chairman in what was thought to be an opposition stronghold. It was a close shave but the victory was Mr. Lee's, a vindication of the policy the MCA has followed in articulating grassroots Chinese concerns somewhat more loudly and stridently than before.

The DAP came into being when Singapore parted company with Malaysia in 1965, making it necessary for Malaysian members of Singapore People's Action Party to adopt a different identity. Like PAP across the causeway (where it has been in power for over two decades), the DAP is multiracial and its principal slogan, a Malaysian Malaysia, voices its demand for fashioning the country's polity in a way satisfactory to all communities, rather than just Malays. But although it fields both Malay and Indian candidates in elections, some of them successfully, the urban Chinese form its real base of support. This factor accounts for its militancy on their behalf, and explains why the party has acquired a strong ethnic tinge. In fact, a clear correspondence can be established between the DAP's electoral success in a constituency and the proportion of Chinese voters in it. Unlike the other parties, the DAP is cadre-based which limits its membership to just a few thousand. It looks to grassroots support on the basis of very active constituency work and mass propaganda, but the opportunities for the latter are extremely limited because public meetings require prior police permission (which is often refused). Moreover, the press is controlled mostly by ruling parties and the electronic media by the government. In addition, the government put a blanket ban on public meetings during the campaigning for both the 1982 and 1978 elections. This proved a considerable handicap to the DAP because its network of local committees is much smaller than that of rivals.

The DAP has, like the MCA, suffered grievously from factional disputes within it. These get accentuated close to a general election, with help no doubt from rival parties. But it has belied prophets of doom: despite successive waves of defection, the party's hard core support has remained intact. As we shall see later, it has successfully expanded

out of the peninsula into the outlying states of Sabah and Sarawak during the last two general elections.

The challenge from the DAP to the ruling coalition is directed against its Chinese parties but the real threat to the system comes from the Islamic party, PAS. This is because the coalition's mainstay is the Malay UMNO with which PAS competes directly for Malay support. With its roots in pre-independence Muslim militancy, PAS has its main support base in the backward but predominantly Malay states of the peninsula in the north and the northeast. In contrast with Gerakan's brief tenure in power in Penang from 1969 to 1972 as an independent party outside the coalition, PAS controlled Kelantan from 1959 to 1978. It was in power in Trengganu too from 1959 for a brief period. This highlights its importance in a regional context but the fact remains that the UMNO has to contend with PAS on a much broader front since both claim to be championing the interests of Malays. (Incidentally, the Malaysian constitution defines a Malay as a Muslim). In the competition for the community's support, the UMNO suffers from the same psychological disadvantage as the Chinese parties in the coalition. While PAS is not hamstrung by coalition commitments and can therefore speak abrasively on communal issues, the UMNO must perforce moderate its rhetoric.

In recent years, PAS has also made stronger use of its Islamic credentials to cash in on the heightened religious awareness among Malays as a result of the world-wide Islamic resurgence. In the course of the 1978 election, the public arguments between PAS and the UMNO left the impression that the former was looking for, and receiving clandestine financial support from certain West Asian states. The politically more important fact however was that PAS was getting an unearned bonus from the missionary activities conducted among youth by various Islamic groups with publicly acknowledged help from their counterparts abroad.

PAS too has internal problems, deriving mainly from a generational clash between young leaders buoyed by Islamic resurgence and the veterans for whom the Islamic handle is a useful political lever. Differences in ideas are reflected not only in their approaches to political competition with the UMNO but also in their life-styles. The young are austere and devout while older leaders have to contend with charges of abuse of power during the long innings in Kelantan and the four years during which the party was a partner in the ruling coalition at the centre.

The competition has gone against the older leaders, notably the former president of the party Datuk Mohammed Asri Muda. In the first place, they had to answer for the setbacks suffered by the party in the 1978 and 1982 elections. Secondly, Datuk Asri tried - unsuccessfully for him - to prevent the young leaders from rising to prominence by denying them funds and support in the latest election. The upshot was sharpened feuding, forcing Datuk Asri to resign in October 1982 after 17 years in office, ostensibly to atone for the party's electoral failures. It remains to see whether this will lead to a change in the PAS political posture in face of the renewed UMNO attempts to wean away grass-roots support from it.

II. The Electoral Process

Looking at the general election of April 1982 in the light of the foregoing review of political parties, the first point to note is that the basic character of electoral competition has remained unchanged during the 25 years since independence in 1957. In the six general elections held during this period (or five counting from 1963 when the present federation emerged with the accession of the outlying Borneo states, Sabah and Sarawak), the fight has always been principally between the multi-racial ruling coalition and challengers identified formally or otherwise with the Malays, accounting for about 54 per cent of the peninsula's population, or with immigrant Chinese citizens who make up another 35 per cent.

The coalition has expanded through co-optation of erstwhile opponents since 1972, except for the one major reversal of the process in 1977 when PAS, as noted earlier, opted out after four years of an uneasy relationship. These changes notwithstanding, the coalition has remained what it has always been, namely a device for mutual accommodation among parties representing Malays, Chinese and Indians (the latter along with others make up the rest of the peninsula's population). The origins of the Alliance, as it was called from 1973 when expansion led to its being renamed as Barisan Nasional or National Front, are embedded in the compromise reached among the three communities on the nature of the Malayan (which later became the Malaysian) state. This involved an acceptance of the political primacy of Malays in return for citizenship rights for immigrants and their equality before the law (subject to specified privileges for

Malays to offset their handicaps due to delayed modernisation).

This mutual accommodation came under strain after the 1969 elections which led to an orgy of violence when the Alliance lost ground to PAS in Malay areas and to Chinese-based in others. The loss was not the cause but the symptom of rising racial tensions. The Alliance approach based on a racial consensus was rejected by a majority of votes (51 per cent) for the first and the only time, though it still won almost two-thirds of the seats. Its response was in part much greater "positive discrimination" in favour of Malays, and in part the neutralisation of opposition from both Malay and Chinese ends by giving their strident advocates a share in power via the expanded Barisan. The cooption approach was extended to Borneo states chiefly to give the much smaller Malay community - only 5 per cent in Sabah and 20 per cent in Sarawak - a securer political future.[1]

Since the watershed year of 1969, the coalition has gained at every election - allowing for the changes in its composition. The critics of the political system point out, however, that the partners in the coalition invariably obtain their support - as again in the latest round - by highlighting how effective each is in protecting the interests of the community it represents.[2] The effect of this, it is argued, is to entrench racial divisions in the polity.

The argument stems from a hankering for a more homogeneous polity than Malaysia now is, or is likely to be in the foreseeable future. The lament misses a point made after a remarkably perceptive study of the 1969 election that the communal "specialists" in the coalition, each seeking to mobilise one segment of the votes, have come "to be regarded more and more as generalists".[3] Since coalition partners must in many constituencies be able to draw votes from communities they do not represent to offset the votes secured by opponents using stronger racial rhetoric, the coalition components have perforce to take a milder and more accommodative stand on sensitive issues. This is undoubtedly making a contribution towards the give and take needed for Malaysia's survival as a nation.

Viewed in this light, the outcome of the 1982 general election shows a significant shift in the political preferences of the peninsula's Chinese community in favour of coalition parties representing the politics of consensus. But the results also show that competition for Malay votes has intensified, though on a localised basis rather than nation-wide,

following a recovery in the fortunes of PAS from the bottom it touched in 1978. The question this raises, therefore, is the impact this will have on UMNO under its new leadership.

Will the Malay credentials of Dr. Mahathir and his deputy Datuk Musa Hitam, forming the 2M team as it has come to be called, permit them to take the somewhat stronger challenge from PAS in their stride? If they can, the coalition government's policies and operating style will no doubt include gestures to Chinese and other minorities to reciprocate the shift in political preferences seen in the election and to encourage them to move further in the same direction. If this happens, the 1982 poll may come in retrospect to be regarded as the final laying of the ghosts of 1969.

III. The Difference in 1982

We need briefly to look back at the previous trial of strength to see the 1982 one in perspective. In the 1978 election the coalition faced stronger competition than in the previous round in 1974 for both Malay and minority votes. PAS was - as mentioned above - back in opposition. But since its share of the vote in 1978 at 15.5 per cent for parliamentary contests was well below the 20.9 per cent it had bagged in 1969, the darkest hour for coalition politics, this did not cause as much alarm as the gains made by the Democratic Action Party.

Relying principally on Chinese votes, the DAP wrested seven additional seats in preponderantly Chinese constituencies - six from the coalition's Chinese and Indian partners in the peninsula and one from a multi-racial component which is the dominant coalition partner in Sabah. Its gain in terms of votes was quite small in the national aggregate - from 18.3 per cent in 1974 to 19.1 per cent in 1978. This obscures, however, that its share in the 22 peninsular constituencies in which Chinese have a majority was as much as 48.9 per cent, enabling it to win 14 of them. Taking this as an indication that the Chinese were turning their back on the politics of accommodation, the Malay secretary-general of Barisan, Mr. Ghafar Baba, described this "as a drift towards communal voting."

Another reason for concern was that the DAP's parliamentary team of 16 included four of Indian origin, three elected from Chinese majority (CM) and one from a Chinese plurality (CP) constituency. The party thus had a larger Indian

contingent than the three elected on the ticket of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) under the coalition banner. This raised the question whether support for the coalition among Indians and other might also get eroded.

The 1982 results have given Barisan a shot in the arm, by raising its share of the vote in the national aggregate from 57.2 to 60.5 per cent. Disregarding 1974 when PAS was temporarily a partner, this was the second highest in favour of coalition politics since the pre-Independence election in 1955. Though competition within the Malay part of the political spectrum intensified, the resulting gains for PAS did not show up in the national aggregate of votes or in terms of parliamentary seats because of an offsetting loss suffered by the party in Dr. Mahathir's home estate, Kedah. A much greater cause of rejoicing, bordering on euphoria, was that the gains the DAP made between 1974 and 1978 were wiped out. In the net, it lost nine seats in the peninsula. The main beneficiary was the MCA which annexed seven of these seats, including one in the critically important contest between its president and the chairman of DAP. Another two were gained in the net by Gerakan. These gains and losses were confined to just the handful of CM and CP seats in the peninsula, the main battle ground in any Malaysian election.

The outcome does suggest that the Chinese voters, particularly those concentrated in CM and CP constituencies, saw merit in the whispering approach, and gave both MCA and Gerakan a sufficient number of additional votes to tilt the balance against DAP. Since most of these had seen close contests in 1978, a small swing made a large difference in the tally of seats. This, as MCA President Lee claims, marks "a break-through."

This article examines in Section IV the validity of the claim in some detail. The focus falls naturally on the 22 CM and eight CP parliamentary seats in the peninsula. Section V offers an assessment of the battles fought between UMNO and PAS for the 79 Malay majority (MM) and five Malay plurality (MP) parliamentary seats in the peninsula. Section VI looks briefly at the outcome in the two outlying states, Sabah and Sarawak, where the political culture is different largely because of the difference in racial composition. In Section VII, the threads are drawn together to offer a hypothesis on how the election results may shape the Malaysian political scene in the few years before the country is at the hustings again.

The analysis is based primarily on parliamentary results. One reason is that dealing within the space of this article with 154 seats, the total in the House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat), is a more manageable task than looking at the same time at the 312 seats in the 11 state assemblies (out of a total of 13) for which elections were held simultaneously. Moreover, the local factors at work within the small state electorates make for nuances which, however interesting, are not relevant to the national picture. Secondly, a set of detailed data is available for parliamentary seats from a computer analysis undertaken by Business Times, Kuala Lumpur's financial daily, which would be difficult, if not impossible, for an individual to duplicate for the state seats.[4]

IV. The Chinese Seats

Although it is convenient to consider seats by racial categories, it is necessary to add at the outset the qualification that the nature of electoral competition varies with the degree to which any one community is preponderant. The case of CP and MP seats is obvious but there are a number of borderline cases even within those classified as CM or MM. Close to Kuala Lumpur is the Port Klang MM constituency in which Barisan invariably fields an Indian from its MIC component because the Malay proportion is only 51 per cent, Chinese 33 and Indian 15. Such constituencies invite intervention of third parties and occasionally of Independents, in the hope that the battle between Barisan and DAP or PAS may be so close that the seat may go by default to the third contender. This has not happened in any election so far, though DAP did win two seats in 1978, and nearly gained two in 1982, because of the split in Malay votes as a result of PAS pitching into the contest. In other words, the third party made it easier for the second to have its way.

While both DAP and PAS stridently deny acting in concert, the placing of candidates in constituencies where one or the other has little possibility of attracting significant support prompts from the Barisan the charge that an "unholy" alliance does exist which neither can afford to acknowledge because it will alienate their respective supporters. Tacit mutual help does make, however, good political sense for them in line with their objective of denying Barisan an overwhelming majority in Parliament - the most the two can hope for. In DAP's case, the argument is elaborated into

the plea that a two-thirds majority, needed to put through constitutional amendments, must be denied to prevent arbitrary changes to the detriment of minorities in violation of the accord reached among the country's multi-racial founding fathers.

The 30 CM and CP seats in the peninsula witnessed a more clear-cut battle in 1982 between Barisan and DAP for two reasons. First, PAS opted out of five contests to limit its presence to nine constituencies, with a median average Malay vote of 38 per cent, against 14 last time. Secondly, the picture in Penang, the only state with a Chinese majority, was muddled in 1978 by the intervention of other Chinese contenders - one group of DAP and another of MCA dissidents taking the field against official nominees - leading to a fortuitous win for DAP in one seat. There was no intervention of this kind of any significance in 1982.

As a result, the 1.3 million votes cast in the CM and CP constituencies, a third of the total for the peninsula, were divided between the two principals - Barisan taking 54.3 per cent against 43.4 that went to DAP. The gap between the two had widened from what it was in 1978.

However, if the 22 CM seats are considered separately, the gap was much less - with Barisan's share (1978 figures in brackets) at 51.8 per cent (41.8) and DAP's 46.69 (48.87). It is clear that the rise in Barisan's share by 10 per cent was much less at the cost of DAP than third parties like PAS and dissidents. The shares of these other contenders in the 22 were down to 0.64 (3.32) and 0.91 (6.01).

The difference in the voting pattern between these 22 CM and the 30 CM plus CP seats highlighted DAP's overwhelming dependence on Chinese voters, despite its being formally multi-racial. First, it collected 62 per cent of its total peninsular vote from the 22 CM constituencies in which it fielded less than 40 per cent of the candidates it had in the peninsular arena. Secondly, the six seats it won in 1982 were in constituencies with a 68 per cent Chinese vote at the minimum. Its 1978 wins were eight from the above 70 per cent category and another five from those with more than 60 per cent Chinese voters. The other two of its 15 peninsular seats of 1978 were gained on a minority vote from constituencies with a lower Chinese concentration, thanks to PAS intervention in line with the pattern discussed above.

To sum up the outcome in parliamentary contests, there has clearly been a turn-around in the fortunes of Barisan,

forcing DAP into retreat. But it has not been pushed back far enough to rule out a comeback. This is why the MCA president's claim of a breakthrough is premature, if not untenable.

V. The Malay Heartland

Turning now to the 79 Malay majority and five Malay plurality seats, the point to remember is how much the political system depends on the outcome in these. There is the obvious arithmetical aspect that 60 per cent of the ruling coalition's strength in parliament typically derives from such Malay seats. In 1982 for instance, UMNO won all its 70 and its two allies MCA and MIC won nine of these 84 contests. UMNO's ability to mobilise the Malay vote in the peninsula for its Chinese-based and Indian partners is a major factor in their overall performance.

However, UMNO's ability to do this in keeping with its accommodative stance on racial issues would be gravely undermined if it found itself losing ground among Malays. The competition for the Malay seats is largely between UMNO and PAS. This is evident from the voting figures showing that other contenders accounted for only about 16 per cent of the total vote of which almost half represented the share taken by UMNO allies by its courtesy.

In the battle between the two principals, UMNO and its allies on the one hand and PAS on the other, the first won hands down. This, of course, is obvious since the Islamic party gained only five seats, the same as in 1978, but the Business Times computer analysis shows that the PAS share of the vote was down from 17.71 per cent to 16.35 per cent in the peninsula. This suggests - on the face of it - that the Islamic party is not a contender to be taken too seriously.

This however will be a wrong conclusion to draw since the aggregate figure obscures PAS strength in its strongholds in the northern state, Kedah, and the east coast states, Kelantan and Trengganu. These taken together with the tiny northern state of Perlis may aptly be described as the Malay heartland. The strength of PAS in this area is evident from its share in the state-wise breakdown of parliamentary votes with 1978 percentages in brackets: Kelantan 46.5 (43.6), Trengganu 41.4 (38.0), Kedah 32.4 (39.6) and Perlis 32.2 (33.5). Out of the 84 Malay seats we are

now looking at, 34 or two-fifths are in these four states. With the PAS share going up in Kelantan by almost another 3 per cent in the latest round, it is approaching parity with UMNO here. Another swing of roughly the same magnitude would take it over the top. The rising challenge from PAS is also confirmed by results for the Kelantan state assembly in which it won 10 seats (out of a total of 36), a gain of eight. In Trengganu, PAS won five state assembly seats out of 28, against none in 1978.

Why the advance turned into a retreat in Kedah is still not clear. The only explanation that journalists, academics and politicians themselves are able to offer is local pride in a son of Kedah, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, having risen to the leadership of both UMNO and the government. The outcome is reflected in the drop in the PAS parliamentary vote in the state and the loss of one of its two parliamentary and five of the seven state seats (the total at stake in Kedah being 13 and 26 respectively).

Basing on this outcome in the Malay heartland, it is clear that UMNO cannot take PAS for granted even though the challenge from the party was successfully contained in the latest round. We discuss later in Section VII the implication of this for the Malaysian polity.

VI. Outlying States

In assessing the results in Sabah and Sarawak, it is necessary to remember how much Malay political dominance in the states depends upon the concurrence of other communities. The demographic picture quoted earlier makes this self-evident. The Chinese in both states are more numerous than Malays - 20 per cent in Sabah and 31 per cent in Sarawak. The rest of the population consists of aborigines, their fragmentation by tribal affiliations explaining in large part the ability of the Malay leadership of both states to hold on to the reins.

The parties active in the two states are local to each, the only exception being DAP which has been seeking to expand out of the peninsula to gain a foothold among the Chinese communities. The parties locally in power are linked, however, to the country's ruling coalition through membership in it, which gives them a share in power at the federal level. Until DAP's emergence on the scene in Sabah in 1978 (when it won one parliamentary seat from a heavily Chinese

constituency and retained it this time), and in Sarawak in the latest round (where it gained two seats in similar constituencies), the opposition to the local coalition affiliates comes almost wholly from local parties seeking to capitalise on Chinese or aboriginal grievances using strong parochial appeals. The only one which was of any consequence ever was the Sarawak National Party (SNAP), drawing support from tribal Ibans. It was in 1974 in about the same position as PAS is now in Kelantan. A deft manoeuvre brought it into the local as well as national coalition soon thereafter, practically extinguishing opposition.

It was expected that the local coalitions would sweep the poll once again in 1982 for the 16 parliamentary seats in Sabah and 24 in Sarawak. But they did not, less because of DAP's limited success than internal feuding. In Sabah, five seats went to so-called Independents but they were actually put up quite openly by Berjaya, which dominates the two-party coalition affiliated with Barisan, against the nominees of the other partner. Berjaya thus ended up with capturing all seats except the one taken by DAP, while the other coalition party was reduced from five to nothing. This poses of course a tricky problem for the coalition's leadership at the national level which says it cannot legitimise the Berjaya defiance of discipline by admitting its successful Independents to the government benches. This makes the five nominally members of the opposition.

A similar situation has arisen in Sarawak as well with three incumbents plunging into the fray as Independents following a denial of the ticket to them by their party SNAP. The factional squabble which led to this situation is another headache for both the local as well as the national coalition leaderships.

However, the more significant change in Sarawak is the debut made by DAP by winning two seats from the Chinese-based Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) and nearly dislodging it from a third in which the difference between the two's shares was as little as 0.3 per cent. But DAP did quite poorly in another seat where it was battling SUPP and also in the fifth when it was pitted against SNAP. Yet it was a very creditable overall performance considering that none of the 11 candidates fielded by the party in the 1979 state election had succeeded. In the state as a whole, its share of the vote was 18.1 per cent, a great improvement over its performance in the last state election when it won just 10 per cent by contesting almost the same proportion of total seats.

The Sabah situation is less alarming for the national coalition leadership because Berjaya, which secured 58.2 per cent of the vote including those taken by its Independents, is in a pretty strong position. The other partner, which ruled the state for long until 1976 is in no position to mount a challenge with its share of the vote now only 14.4 per cent. In Sarawak the local three-party coalition secured 56.7 per cent of the vote compared with 63 per cent in 1978. Even if the three seats won by rebels are excluded, its share was down to 59 per cent in the rest of the poll. As a result, the strains within the coalition are rising, with both SNAP and SUPP harbouring a growing suspicion that their problems are at least in part due to manipulations by the Malay partner, called PBB by its Malay acronym. An effort to infuse new life into the local coalition was made by the national leadership by replacing the Chief Minister in March 1981, but more will clearly have to be done.

VII. Conclusions

Despite the unexpected setback in Sabah and Sarawak, the coalition emerged stronger from the 1982 election by gaining an extra seat (or six more if Berjaya's so-called Independents are included because they were explicitly fielded by this coalition partner). Barisan also added to its share of the vote by 3.3 per cent (or by one more per cent if Berjaya's Independents are included in the tally). But the weight of individual coalition partners is slightly different from 1978, with Chinese MP's elected by MCA and Gerakan now 29 out of 132 against 21 before out of 131. They may have the temptation to use this additional leverage to bargain for more concessions - even if only of a cosmetic kind - for their community to consolidate the gains they made in the basically Chinese seats. MCA in particular may find itself under pressure from hardliners in its ranks because its campaign theme was the need for the Chinese to unite in its support to protect their interests.

As stated at the outset, the election was called by the new UMNO leaders to win national endorsement. Having obtained it, they are certain to use their enhanced stature to strengthen their hold on the party. There are several indications that Dr. Mahathir wants to get PAS back into the fold in a repeat of 1973. But he wants it without some of its top leaders who have locked themselves into a position of implacable hostility to UMNO. The fact that the PAS

president has since resigned, as noted earlier, may mean a further erosion in morale, allowing Dr. Mahathir to go over the heads of leaders to other who may be more inclined to bury the hatchet.

In other words, Dr. Mahathir's drive to consolidate support from Malays is continuing. But he is doing this from a position of strength, and is not under pressure therefore to prove his Malay (and Muslim) credentials. He can afford therefore to keep in mind the compulsions under which the Chinese parties operate vis-a-vis their community. This implies a readiness to lend them a hand by ensuring, for example, that poverty redressal programmes cater more adequately for the Chinese than is now the case, their educational problems are alleviated and the Bumiputra share in the national cake is increased in a manner that the Chinese do not suffer from a sense of deprivation.

This election has once again demonstrated that the coalition partners need each other for mobilising support across racial dividing lines - UMNO to retain its long lead over PAS, and the Chinese and Indian coalition partners to survive against DAP. The system thus serves their individual self-interest and is the best guarantee that the politics of consensus will continue.

References

- 1 This racial breakdown of the population is from table C.3 on p.319 in Malaysia - A World Bank Country Report, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Boston. It relates to 1975; later figures are not available.
- 2 Within Malaysia, the most cogent of such critics in Aliran, a group of non-partisan intellectuals headed by Dr. Chandra Muzaffar. It published a broadsheet just ahead of the 1982 poll which said: "The fourth unhealthy trend (in this election) is the use of ethnic fears and hopes to win votes. Almost all the contenders are espousing the cause of religious and communal chauvinism. Although both sides accuse each other of being chauvinistic and fanatical, it is like the pot calling the kettle black".
- 3 Ratnam, K.J. and Milne, R.S.: The 1969 Parliamentary Election in West Malaysia, Pacific Affairs, Vol. XLIII, No.2 (Summer 1970), pp.203-26.
- 4 This author in his capacity as editorial adviser of this newspaper was associated with the analysis undertaken for

the paper by Office Automation Sdn Bhd. He owes thanks to many colleagues for help with statistical analysis as well as very useful local insights.

- 5 Racial breakdown of the constituencies is based on 1977 data compiled by an authoritative source. Despite best efforts of this author and his colleagues in Business Times, it proved impossible to obtain later data. The assumption is perforce made that demographic growth of the past five years has not changed the racial shares significantly in the country as a whole, although the justification needs to be added that the proportion of Malays would have increased to a limited extent in urban constituencies in line with the secular trend in this direction.