

The wipe-out of 'old Malaysia' should prompt soul-searching

Voters want a new way forward after frustration with intense politicking over the past two years

Serina Rahman

For *The Straits Times*

Malaysia's 15th General Election proved to be another one for the history books.

While the result of a hung Parliament was within broad expectations, how Malaysians would eventually vote was always going to be up in the air. It is worth remembering that few had expected voters at the last general election to unseat the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) in 2018.

This time, though the BN government went in confident, buoyed by recent state election wins, the tide turned quickly. Indeed, Saturday night was full of surprises and shocks.

THE FELLING OF BIG NAMES

For one thing, voters signalled an unmistakable desire to move on from "old Malaysia" and incessant politicking.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad came in second-last in his Langkawi constituency, garnering barely a fifth of Perikatan Nasional's (PN) Datuk Mohd Suhaimi Abdullah's 25,463 votes in this five-cornered fight. He even lost his deposit, the ultimate humiliation for a political stalwart and two-time prime minister. Without a single seat secured, his Parti Pejuang Tanah Air is done, and so is his new coalition Gerakan Tanah Air.

His son Mukhriz Mahathir, the popular and previous chief minister of Kedah, also fared badly, coming in last in his four-cornered fight for Jerlun, and garnering only a tenth of winner PN's Dr Abdul Ghani Ahmad's 31,685 votes.

Many Umno names shared a similar fate. Competition was intense and the results were very close. A great many old faces will now be forced into retirement.

Finance Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz lost to Pakatan Harapan's (PH) Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad by a mere 1,000-odd votes in Kuala Selangor. The 71-year-old Tengku Adnan Mansor was defeated by PN Education Minister Radzi Jidin by 2,310 votes. The 85-year-old Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's shocking loss by 163 votes to Parti Islam SeMalaysia's (PAS) Datuk Mohd Azizi Abu Naim in Gua Musang eliminated



Clockwise from top left: Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and his son Mukhriz Mahathir fared badly in the election. Big Umno names such as Finance Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz and veteran lawmaker Tengku Adnan Mansor were also defeated. PHOTOS: JASON QUAH, THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK

the only blue patch in Kelantan's green sea of PAS support.

Big Umno bets didn't pay off. Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin, who announced his intention to become prime minister in the next decade, and was seen as capable in steering Malaysia through the Covid-19 pandemic, couldn't win enough votes to unseat his Sungei Buloh PH incumbent.

WHAT EXPLAINS BN'S POOR PERFORMANCE?

The BN government took a beating with an unprecedented collapse of public support, winning only 30 of the possible 219 parliamentary seats. Party leaders, commentators and analysts will be poring over the results in the days and weeks to come to read the tea leaves and discern implications going forward.

They should address longstanding public frustration over toxic elite politics, from the break-up of the PH government in 2020, with Dr Mahathir's refusal to hand over power to PH chief Anwar Ibrahim, to the opportunistic Sheraton Move, which led to the complete replacement of the PH government without an election.

When the PN government fell apart in July 2021 after Umno withdrew support from then Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, this only solidified the sentiment that political leaders were more interested in grabbing

power than in working for the larger national interest of getting Malaysia through a crisis. This feeling only grew over the last year.

Public anger over perceived double standards also stewed, when ordinary citizens were slapped with harsh Covid-19 lockdown rules and sanctions for petty violations, while political leaders, celebrities and public figures flouted rules flagrantly and got away with a slap on the wrist.

But the BN government miscalculated in assuming that the support won in recent state elections would manifest again at the 15th General Election. Voter turnout in state elections was much lower than usual, as people focused on working to put food on the table rather than participate in state politics in this post-Covid-19 period.

Thus, when this election was called, smack in the middle of monsoon season, with vivid memories of people being stranded on rooftops for days, and homes violently washed away in sudden downstream river surges still fresh on the minds of voters, Malaysians cast protest votes.

In the end, the national mood did the BN in. Opposition parties PH and PN ran campaigns emphasising a cleaner government, social welfare and reforms, but fatigue, frustration and disillusion created an anti-incumbency effect. Malaysians want to see new faces

lead the country after a stormy four years.

TAKING LEADERS TO TASK

Voters also specifically opted to punish those seen as responsible for the unnecessary political drama over the Covid-19 period on both sides of the aisle. These are the "frequent fliers" who switched parties and allegiances for political expediency.

Datuk Seri Azmin Ali, largely seen as the key perpetrator of the Sheraton Move, lost his three-term seat to the current Selangor Chief Minister, PH's Datuk Seri Amirudin Shari, in Gombak by 12,729 votes.

Datuk Zuraida Kamaruddin who skipped between four parties since the 14th General Election, but eventually stood in this election as a Parti Bangsa Malaysia candidate, garnered only 8 per cent of the winning Ms Rodziah Ismail's vote in a nine-cornered fight.

On Umno's part, president Zahid Hamidi has taken the most hits, replacing the role of former prime minister Najib Razak and his wife Rosmah as public enemy No. 1, in pressuring then Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob to call elections before the courts reach a verdict on his graft charges.

In the days ahead, Zahid will face more calls to step down. He may have scraped by with a mere 348-vote advantage in his Perak seat, but this was hardly a victory by any count.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Another thing is certain: Malaysia is becoming more polarised and any political coalition will be fragile. The campaigning season was intense. Many fights were very close. The most seats went to two extreme ends of the political spectrum – PAS with 49 seats and the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party with 40.

Interestingly, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (31), Umno (26) and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (24) garnered less than half of the votes won by their respective coalitions, despite being seen as key anchor component parties with the greatest sway over key Cabinet positions, policy positions and public profile.

So who will emerge victorious and govern Malaysia? Negotiations are, at time of writing, feverishly taking place across the South China Sea as both PN and PH court Gabungan Parti Sarawak and the powerful "Borneo block". East Malaysia will again become kingmaker. Some bargains will have to be struck to hold Malaysia together.

Let's hope the government formed can break from the past and begin a new, healthier phase in politics for Malaysia.

• Serina Rahman is a lecturer at the Department of South-east Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, and associate fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.