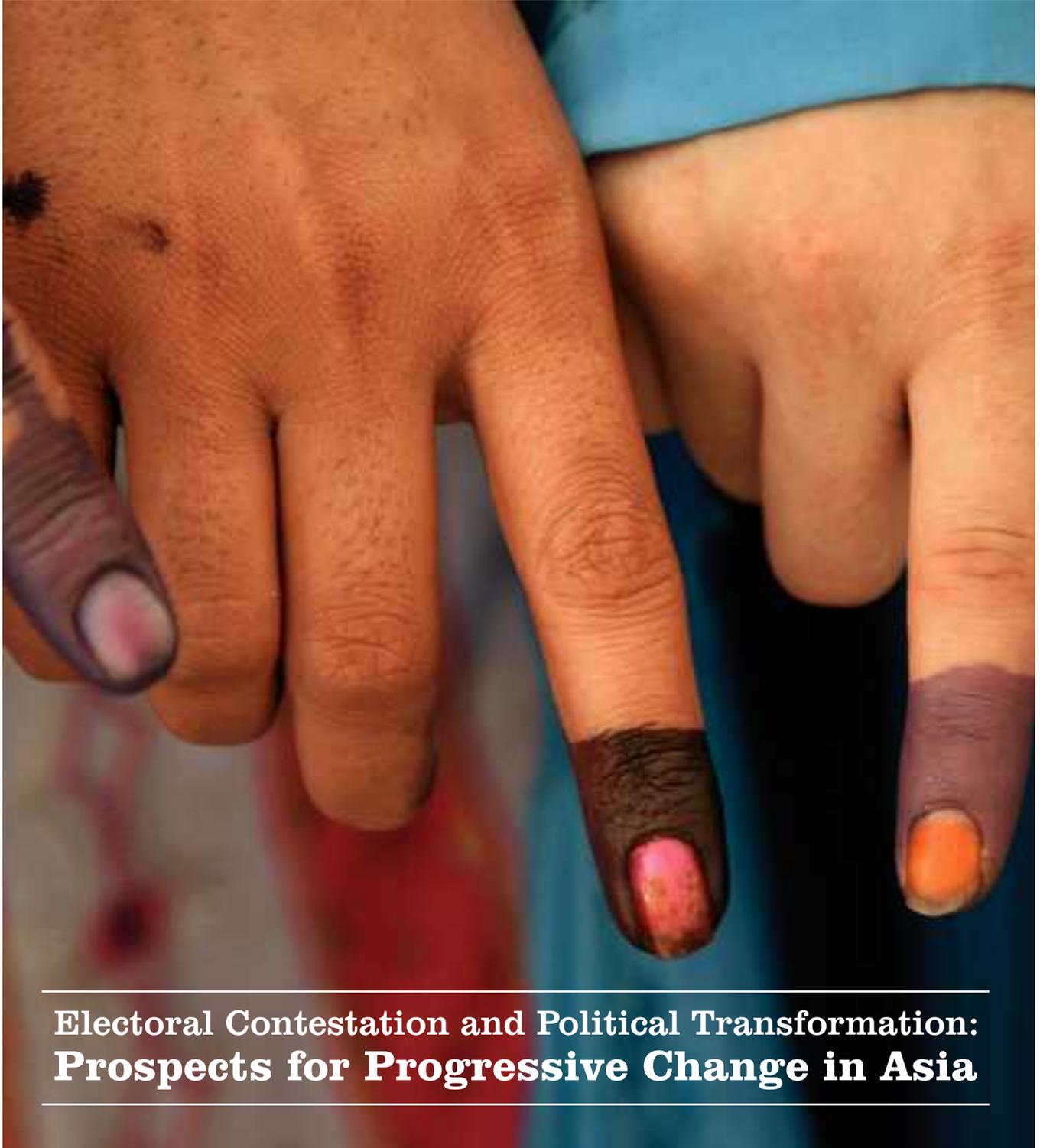


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**Electoral Contestation and Political Transformation:
Prospects for Progressive Change in Asia**

Electoral Contestation and Political Transformation: Prospects for Progressive Change in Asia

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The aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession, which brought many center-economies to the brink of another depression, witnessed an intense showdown between increasingly fragile elected-governments prioritizing the integrity of the financial system, on one hand, and scores of civic groups protesting austerity programs, on the other. But the dramatic explosion of protests against government policies, however, wasn't confined to the streets of New York, Athens, Rome, Paris, and Barcelona.

After a decade of robust economic growth and rising inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Global South, the Great Recession proved to be truly global in its breadth and scale, as it shattered equity markets among developing countries, deepened the volatility of basic commodities' prices to the detriment of poorer countries, and steeply raised market uncertainty – reversing decades of hard-fought developmental gains. And for this reason, the world came to question the wisdom of unfettered market economics, anchored by finance-driven capitalism and light regulatory touch.

In some parts of the world, the response was radical. Three years into the crisis, the Arab world, long seen as the strongest fortress of autocratic regimes, succumbed to a wave of popular uprisings, which came on the heels of a decade of crony capitalism and autocratic consolidation, aggravated by the destabilizing impact of the global financial crisis. The continuous erosion in social welfare, driven by market liberalization schemes, amid deepening crackdown on the opposition simply reached a critical threshold of no return.

...the relative impotence of democratic states in the run up to the crisis, and their subsequent kowtow to the financial sector and business lobby despite the historic bail outs of flailing banks, raised serious questions as to the ability of elected governments to rein in capitalism's excesses by assuming a much more pro-active, people-centered economic approach.

Despite the subsequent efforts by counter-revolutionary forces to hijack the gains of varying democratic uprisings, from Tunisia to Egypt, non-stop popular mobilization has become the new normal.

But more fundamentally, the relative impotence of democratic states in the run up to the crisis, and their subsequent kowtow to the financial sector and business lobby despite the historic bail outs of flailing banks, raised serious questions as to the ability of elected governments to rein in capitalism's excesses by assuming a much more pro-active, people-centered economic approach.

Despite the adoption of counter-cyclical policies, from large-scale stimulus programs to looser monetary policy, most matured as well as fledgling democracies have failed to achieve their pre-crisis economic dynamism. Inequality rates have persisted, while youth unemployment is a major concern for almost all democratic countries. The Great Recession disrupted upward economic trends, and compounding deep structural problems.

Even among supposedly budding democracies and major emerging markets, recent months saw an eruption in public discontent against popular and

democratically-elected governments. While in Turkey, a seemingly mundane demonstration against the destruction of the venerable Gezi Park turned into a sustained stream of spontaneous demonstrations against Prime Minister Erdogan, shortly after Brazil – amid much fanfare over hosting the world's biggest sporting events in quick succession -- followed suit, as biggest demonstrations (for better basic services and accountability) in almost 20 years rocked the whole country. Then came the 17-million march against Egypt's President, Mohammad Morsi, culminating in a coup against the country's first democratically-elected leader. While each country represents a set of unique attributes, what such large-scale protests could imply is the erosion of elections as the primary tool for democratic arbitration.

...a number of Asian states have nevertheless seen a continued and passionate engagement with electoral contestation as a means for political transformation amid continuing global economic uncertainty.

This was precisely the reason why the Great Recession was also an assault on the institutions and idea of representative democracy -- thus, more broadly, undermining the presumed nexus between democratic contestation, on one hand, and economic dynamism and public accountability, on the other.

Against such gloomy backdrop, a number of Asian states have nevertheless seen a continued and passionate engagement with electoral contestation as a means for political transformation amid continuing global economic uncertainty.

Fateful Elections

The year 2013 has proven to be a critical juncture in the political landscape of a number of Asian states, which participated in crucial elections to determine the political direction of their country.

In hybrid regimes such as Pakistan and Malaysia, whereby autocratic institutions have uneasily co-existed with electoral contestation, the early months of 2013 saw a historic electoral battle for the seat of power.

In Pakistan, rattled by a spate of electricity shortages, religious extremism, and economic downturn, a record-high number (60% of the electorate) of people braved all odds to partake in the country's first civilian transfer of power through the ballot box. As Hassan Nasir, the senior vice president of Pakistan's Awami Party, explains in the Quarterly, "These were the first elections where a clean and peaceful transition was made from one civilian government to another. In all of Pakistan's 67 years of existence every single democratically parliament was either a victim of a coup de etat by the military or was broken up by the President."

After a dismal performance in office, the incumbent Pakistan's People's Party (PPP) under President Asif Zardari lost to the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N). Despite fears of large-scale attacks by Taliban forces against elections polls, and the lingering fear of military intervention in an event of uncertain electoral outcome, Pakistan cruised through its first attempt at consolidating its democratic credentials. As Nasir aptly puts it, the deeper significance of the elections lies in how it signaled the "renewed interest in the political process and the participation in democracy after decades of military rule, prov[ing] that the Pakistani citizens have matured and are now ready to start bearing the benefits of democracy."

Despite a global fascination with the widely-covered campaign of former cricket superstar Imran Khan, who has called for the end of corruption, drone attacks, and tribalistic politics, the elections saw, as Nasir points out, how "voters have rejected ideologies in favor of



Photo by: Usman Malik

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blood ties." Such trend reflects the degree to which Pakistan is yet to instill a civic culture, which prioritizes collective and national interest over particularistic and communal allegiances. The victory of conservative parties, tapping into ethnic and parochial faultlines, suggests that the status quo will be largely maintained, leaving structural problems relatively intact for the medium-term.

In Malaysia, after decades of rapid economic growth and encouraging social mobility for certain sectors, recent years have witnessed a dangerous spike in corruption (among the highest in the region) amid what seems to be the a "middle income trap". As emerging markets guru, Ruchir Sharma (2011: 149) explains, Malaysia is the only Asian country that has been experiencing a dip in FDI, with the total outflow of investment dollars, beginning in early 2006, going into the negative territory, reaching 2.5 of the GDP by late-2011.

While Malaysia is widely praised for its draconian approach to the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis, when former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad imposed capital controls to stave off the currency onslaught, the country's surplus turned into deficit for the next decade or so. Government debt as the share of GDP --

contrary to most Asian countries -- also rose in the same period, from 20 percent to 50 percent. (Sharma, 2011: 147) The country's growth has been largely driven by the commodity boom -- thanks to a voracious China -- and ramped up government spending. Since Mahathir's formal withdrawal from office in 2003, the mixture of economic mismanagement, corruption, and weak leadership has undermined the country's legendary New Economic Model (NEM) aimed at turning Malaysia into a fully developed country in early 21st century.

Absent satisfactory economic performance, and the discontent with the continuous grip of a single dominant party (UMNO) on the state, the Malaysian urban and educated population has increasingly swung in the direction of a new politics. And this is where the Malaysian opposition -- promising to end discriminatory policies, rein in corruption, and introduce genuine democracy and economic dynamism -- has emerged as a potent force for change, increasingly undermining the political hegemony of the Barisan Nasional (BN) ruling coalition -- with the 13th Malaysian General Elections representing a potential watershed in the country's political landscape.

As expected, the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition secured the majority of popular votes, scoring a commanding victory in the urban centers as well as among educated classes across ethnic groups. As Malaysian political analyst, Boon Kia Meng, argues in the *Quarterly*, the elections showed how “a clear geographic antagonism [is] developing in the Malaysian electorate, between rural and urban Malaysia. (BN, especially UMNO, is still dominant in most rural seats, while the Pakatan won most urban seats).”

But the opposition won only 40 percent of the total parliamentary seats, allowing the ruling coalition to cling on to power. As Malaysian Member of Parliament, Zairil Khir Johari succinctly puts it in the *Quarterly*, “The results of the 13th General Election of course now stands as the clearest proof that the existing electoral system is a broken one.” What saved the BN from formal defeat was, Zairil argues, “the grossly disproportionate correlation between popular votes and seats won”, because of “a legacy stemming from five decades of gerrymandering, mal-apportionment and worst of all, the erosion of constitutional safeguards meant to prevent the very same irrational variances that have occurred today.”

Malaysia’s “partially free but not fair” elections has led to an uptick in BN’s attack against minority groups, an act born out of desperation and a clear display of panic over the loss of its decades-long political hegemony, accusing the latter of betraying the ruling coalition by supporting the opposition, while forcing the incumbent to rely more on strongholds such as Sabah and Sarawak, which have benefited from more cabinet allotment this time after decades of neglect.

Glimmer of Hope?

While elections in Pakistan and Malaysia reflected a mixture of a crystallized yearning for change, on one hand, and resistance by reactionary forces, on the other, the recent elections in the Philippines and Indonesia -- widely seen as the two leading democracies in Southeast Asia -- have somehow raised hopes for long-term

democratic transformation. Add to this, both countries have also been enjoying an uptick in economic growth, with Indonesia emerging as one of the world’s major emerging economies, recently joining the elite club of trillion-dollar economies, while the Philippines is no longer the “Sick Man of Asia”, scoring the highest Asian growth rate in early 2013.

The mid-2013 by-elections in the Philippines saw the reformist Aquino administration securing a renewed mandate to push for its ‘good governance’ initiatives, which have been

country’s electoral institutions. As Ramon C. Casiple, the executive director of the Institute for Political and Electoral Reform (IPER) argues in the *Quarterly*, “the electoral successes of democratic Left candidates and parties, the active participation of more people, including the middle classes, in election monitoring, citizen-voter education, and in anti-cheating, anti-violence, and anti-vote-buying operations, and in the issue-based voting in some local elections” suggests the continuous commitment of progressive forces to overcome the trappings of elite-dominate democracy.

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fueling growing confidence in the economy and the country’s political institutions. From 2001-2010, the Philippines was caught in a vicious cycle of political instability, economic uncertainty, and democratic reversals. So for many observers, the continuation of the Aquino administrations’ (2010-2016) reform agenda was crucial to overcoming the pitfalls of a decade-long backslide.

For president Aquino, who relished the dominance of his senatorial bets, and a continued ascendancy in the congressional race, it was an important milestone in securing a strong mandate to enact his policies in the remaining half of his term. The incumbent parties’ senatorial bets won nine out of 12 seats, but the opposition was able to also score upsets in the provincial race. The elections were hailed by international and local observers as generally peaceful and fair, with the government downplaying technical glitches disrupting the country’s second automated elections: an estimated 200 out of 77,000 Precinct Count Optical Scan (PCOS) machines encountered technical glitches on the elections day.

Citizen participation also created an atmosphere of renewed hoped in the

A year earlier, Indonesia held a crucial gubernatorial election in Jakarta, testing the maturity of its recent democratic gains. Since the end of the Suharto regime, precipitated by the economic tumults of the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis, the country has made a steady march in the direction of democratic deepening. But Indonesia’s democratization and economic boom has also been accompanied by renewed concerns over corruption, cronyism, and inequality. So, many observers closely watched the Jakarta elections, and evaluated whether the country has made an irreversible commitment to redressing structural problems inhibiting the full realization of its potentials and placing institutions of representative democracy on the hot seat. And to the surprise of many, the gubernatorial elections ushered in a new breed of progressive leadership.

As University of Indonesia academics, Nur Iman Subono and Ikhsan Darmawan, analyze in the *Quarterly*, the elections saw the shocking triumph of youth and promise over transactional politics and incumbency. The elections were highly symbolic because, as Subono

and Darmawan argue, “after more than 10 years, democracy in Indonesia has started to be questioned, and even its role and usefulness to society at large is being challenged. [Because] in many cases it turns out that democracy by and large doesn't provide benefits or welfare for its citizens.”

The elections saw how “people empowerment” trumped cynical politics developed by the powerful incumbent, the Foke-Nara team. Relying on their clean record as statesmen and progressive, young leaders, the Jokowi-Ahok team went on to claim the top two posts in Jakarta's regional government. As the Indonesian academics argue, “what happened in Jakarta election in 2012 was a form of 'middle class' protest against the incumbent governor”, based on the electorate's “evaluation of Governor Foke' performance.” Crucially, they argue, “The level of education and expertise of the voters heavily influenced the performance evaluation of the incumbent governor,” rather than the demagoguery and campaign machinery of the incumbent.

The Progressive and Radical Left was also able to retain some of its luster, with groups such as Akbayan (2 seats) as well as the Makabayn bloc (7 seats) maintaining their number of congressional seats, while Akbayan's senatorial bet Risa Hontiveros managed to garner as much as 11 million votes in the national elections, demonstrating her party's ability to reach out to mainstream voters. As Akbayan's Deputy Secretary General Emman Hizon argues in the *Quarterly*: “Akbayan and the Makabayn bloc have established themselves as the two most serious and sustained electoral projects coming from the left community. It also demonstrated that they have significant mass bases that can 'passively accumulate power' under a non-revolutionary situation and use it as leverage as they navigate an electoral process dominated by the elite.”

Nonetheless, critics continue to raise concerns with the dominance of political dynasties in the Philippine electoral landscape, where 73 out of 80 provinces are led by an assortment of roughly 178 dynasties, while there are continuing concerns as to whether Indonesia's political institutions are robust enough to tackle endemic corruption and related concerns with governance.

As Hizon notes in the *Quarterly*, the recently-concluded by-elections demonstrated the dominance of the oligarchy in national elections, thus underscoring the importance of exploring new avenues for political contestation: “The local arena, notwithstanding the dominion of the national government, has proven that it is a worthwhile platform to implement important policy decisions on local matters as well as act as a good gauge of local opinion. The local also provides opportunities for the democratic left to mobilize the voting public outside of elections on issues like the environment, health, living wage, humane housing, and living pensions for the elderly, among others; and a greater chance of presenting an alternative approach to local and national issues.”

Aside from the established elite, the other challenge to progressive groups, Hizon contends, is how beginning in 2007 “territorial and regional partylist groups have significantly taken away votes from many left-leaning "national" partylist groups in their respective base-

provinces. As such, together with weak or dwindling mass bases, demleft partylist groups are hard put to get votes from areas where the regional partylist groups are based.” Overall, he contends that grass-roots push for the reform of the party-list system is imperative, lest national elections become increasingly restrictive and co-opted by regional elite. Overall, this edition of the *Quarterly* aims to look at the different dimensions of recent elections across Asia, namely the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, and assess whether we have seen changes in the balance of forces in favor of the progressives, or confronted with an indeterminate future amid the continuing dominance of the Ancien Régime.

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Indonesia and The Power of "Ordinary People": The Case of Jokowi-Ahok

NUR IMAN SUBONO AND
IKHSAN DARMAWAN

Introduction

After the collapse of the authoritarian "New Order" regime, Indonesia is often referred to as the third largest democracy in the world after the United States and India. The country is more known internationally as a democratic state with the largest Muslim population in the world. This is important because it is often -- and mistakenly -- perceived that Islam is not compatible with democracy. Nevertheless, after more than 10 years, democracy in Indonesia has started to be questioned, and even its role and usefulness to society at large is being challenged. In many cases it turns out that democracy by and large doesn't provide benefits or welfare for its citizens. Instead, in Indonesia democracy has largely benefited the elite oligarchy, both the old (which was part of the authoritarian New Order) and the new, the emerging "little kings" at the provincial and county-level cities in the era of decentralization and regional autonomy. This oligarchic circle controls economic resources, political power and even the state apparatus, in order to strengthen and perpetuate the power of their elite interests.

At this point, it is natural to ask whether Indonesia is still "on the right track" in the more substantial democratic process, or instead we've actually failed, only to give birth to crony democracy -- a democracy that has been hijacked, controlled and monopolized by the oligarchs. Indonesian democracy is arguably a democracy without representation. There is no easy answer for that question, and of course we need a deeper look to analyse the issue, especially on the various political phenomena at the local level.

Jokowi-Ahok phenomenon: Political Anomaly or Hope for a Change?

Almost every day we see in the mass media, both print and electronic, various legal cases implicating local and national leaders, members of parliament, political parties and state



Photo by: ANTARA/M Agung Rajasa

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officials. Almost everything is related to transactional politics operating behind government projects, which, in turn, feed corruption and bribery, misuse of government budget or money politics used in the local elections. Therefore, it is not surprising from a variety of national surveys conducted by various institutions, to show an increasing distrust in public officials, particularly vis-à-vis law enforcement officers, politicians, political parties, parliamentarians and bureaucrats. At the same time, the level of "golongan putih" (abstaining), the person who does not

exercise his right to vote, in local elections are also on the rise.

Nevertheless there are interesting political developments in Jakarta. As the prime location of business and seat of power, many people can easily observe Jakarta's dynamic socio-political transformation. At this time the attention shifted onto the Regional Head Election (*Pemilukada*) in 2012 whereas the incumbent candidate, Governor Fauzi Bowo, had to accept defeat by challenger, Joko Widodo, who at the time of the election was still serving as the Mayor of Solo, Central Java.

In the election that took two rounds, Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was paired with Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), a former Mayor from Bangka Belitung. They won in the second round, gathering 2,472,130 votes (53.82% of total votes). Meanwhile, Fauzi Bowo

(Foke), who was paired with Nahrowi Ramli (Nara) managed to obtain 2,120,815 votes (46.18% of total votes). The Jokowi-Ahok pair was able to win in all cities/districts of Jakarta, except for the Thousand Islands area (See, Table 1).

Table 1
Result – Number of Vote Gained
in the 2nd round of Governor DKI Jakarta Election (2012)

City Area	Foke-Nara	Jokowi-Ahok
West Jakarta	474.298	577.232
East Jakarta	611.366	695.220
Central Jakarta	249.427	256.529
North Jakarta	300.188	432.714
South Jakarta	476.742	507.257
Seribu Islands	8.794	3.178
Total	2.472.130	2.120.815

Sources: Jakarta Election Commission (KPU), 2012

Earlier, in the first round when there were still six (6) pairs of candidates, Jokowi-Ahok were able to pull a surprise many because they managed to obtain the most votes and get first position by 1,847,157 votes (42.60%), defeating the strongest couple expected at that time Foke-Nara, which “only” gathered

1,476,648 votes (34, 05%) (See, Table 2). It is surprising because the so-called victory invalidated the predictions of several polling institutes, which predicted that for first round of the *Pemilukada*, the Foke-Nara pair was expected to win the round by gaining at least 50% + 1 of votes.

Table 2
Election Result – Number of Vote Gained
in the 1st round of Governor DKI Jakarta Election (2012)

No.	Candidates	Votes Gained	%age Gained (%)
1	Foke-Nara	1.476.648	34.05%
2	Hendardji Supandji-Ahmad Riza Patria	85.990	1.98%
3	Jokowi-Ahok	1.847.157	42.60%
4	Hidayat Nur Wahid-Didik Junaedi Rachbini	508.113	11.72%
5	Faisal Basri-Biem Benyamin	215.935	4.98%
6	Alex Noerdin-Nono Sampono	202.643	4.67%
	Total	4.336.486	100%

Sources: Jakarta Election Commission (KPU), 2012

Why the victory of the Jokowi-Ahok tandem is a political phenomenon interesting to ponder? The reason is pretty simple: the incumbent Governor Foke represented all the socio-political and economic “power” sources. Foke's capital strength was practically almost unlimited; as he was still serving as incumbent Governor, he still held the city's bureaucratic authority; and he won the support of almost all major political

parties such as the Democratic Party, Golkar, PKS, PAN, PPP, PKB, and Hanura. Not to mention the political-image that Foke-Nara built represented the power of religion and ethnicity, that of Islam and Betawi. From the records of Indonesia's local elections history, the 'incumbent factor' plays a very important role – if not as *the* absolute factor -- in propelling the candidate to win an election.

Additionally, as stated earlier, almost all the top Survey Institutes had projected a Foke-Nara outright victory in the very first round. Interestingly the comments of political figures such as Amien Rais (from The Mandate Party - PAN) or Hidayat Nur Wahid (from Justice and Prosperity Party – PKS) that supported Foke-Nara pair tend to be doubtful, belittle and even discredit Jokowi-Ahok capabilities, especially by using Jokowi's reputation in leading Solo as a Mayor – a far smaller area compared to Jakarta – and their niche chance to win Jakarta *Pemilukada* (Nugroho and Nugroho, 2012). The following are statements from Amin Rais and Hidayat Nur Wahid, both former Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) RI, regarding Jokowi-Ahok:

"I'm proud when someone from Solo can lead Jakarta. But when (Jokowi) led Solo, the poverty rate actually increased in the city. How then to lead Jakarta that has a figure five to six times higher than Solo? Thus, the title of being one of the best mayor in the world is too exaggerating and misleading." (8/21/2012)

Meanwhile Hidayat Nur Wahid commented as follows:

"I appreciate those who want to support Jokowi as Jakarta's candidate for Government. But why go forward if there is no guarantee to win."



Photo by: Vera Altmeyer

But those belittling and even discrediting comments suddenly vanished when the political reality of Jokowi-Ahok victory negated those mistaken expectations. Their victory was only supported by two political parties, PDIP and Gerindra, while the other candidates shown in the tables were supported by the rest of Indonesia's main political parties. At this point a question arises: is this a "political anomaly" in Indonesia's democratic journey, an unforeseen event challenging the normal operations and function of Indonesia's democracy? Or conversely, only a glimmer of hope amid a bleak landscape?

The Role of "Ordinary People" as "Human Empowerment"

It turns out that the role of "ordinary people", morphing into a more concrete force of democratization reflecting a broader trend of "human empowerment", have become a critical factor amid elite transactional process in a representative democracy, or an electoral democracy where the masses' preferences are otherwise ignored, manipulated. It turns out that effective democracy reflects the inclusion of "ordinary people" over the ownership of resources and values that can empower people to become an effective force to overthrow the elite or the oligarchy.

Democracy can run effectively only when the exercise of power reflects the interest of society. In the case of Jakarta elections, we can observe or identify the sequences of human empowerment -- propelling Jokowi-Ahok to victory as Jakarta's Governor and Vice Governor -- composed of three main elements: namely, (a) action resources, (b) self-expression values, and (c) democratic institutions (Inglehart and Welzel, 2008).

On the sources of action, it is about good material and cognitive resources. These include, among others, education and expertise or skills that will help people to organize, regulate and govern themselves. Modernisation, specifically economic development, in Jakarta under Governor Foke, with all its successes and failures, has increased the level of education and public awareness to

become more critical and free in assessing, understanding and articulating their participation in politics. Therefore, the people of Jakarta place emphasis on self-expression values, on things like justice, equality, freedom, empathy for those who were marginalized and subordinated, and they are also against arrogance and abuse of power. At the same time, democratic institutions accommodate civil and political rights that educate the community on how to organize their public and private life. These three key elements of community empowerment have increased the strength of the people, so much so that it is difficult, if not impossible, for elites or oligarchs to resist and overcome it -- as demonstrated by the defeat of incumbent Foke-Nara pair in Jakarta *Pemilukada* last year.

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Photo by: ANTARA/Zabur Karuru

The Role of “Ordinary People” Behind Jokowi-Ahok victory

There are some issues that can be raised about the role of “ordinary people” behind Jokowi-Ahok victory. *First* factor is the voters. According to the Indonesian Survey Institute’ (LSI) study, what happened in Jakarta election in 2012 was a form of “middle class” protest against the incumbent governor. According to LSI, Jakarta voters have a larger proportion of “middle class” compared to other areas in Indonesia. The LSI study added that Jokowi competitiveness against Foke was mainly determined by the middle class’ critical assessment of Foke. There was a kind of “social punishment” given by society, including the middle class, against Jakarta government’s performance under Foke. The punishment was over the values of self-expression that refers to a sense of justice, humane treatment and others matters that were often violated or ignored during the administration of Governor Foke. Such sentiments were grounded in experiences such as the growing number of evictions against street vendors or informal sector; increasing unemployment and poverty; as well as the effects of unemployment and poverty, and increasing crime rate. These conditions certainly made a great number of people feel increasingly uncomfortable and unsafe to stay in Jakarta. From the LSI multivariate analysis, it was concluded that the most influential factor for the electorate in their selection of Jokowi over Foke was their evaluation of Governor Foke’ performance. The level of education and expertise of the voters heavily influenced the performance evaluation of the incumbent governor. On the other hand, education is very strongly associated with exposure to the mass media, especially newspapers. Critical media framing against the incumbent had rallied the middle classes against Governor Foke.

Second factor is the astute utilization of social media, mainly twitter. Disna Harvens findings (2013) showed that twitter mobilisation played a vital part in Jokowi-Ahok victory at the Jakarta election 2012. In this case, twitter acted not only as an instrument to promote the image, policies, and campaign of Jokowi-Ahok, but also recruit volunteers to counter negative attacks by the opposing camp and mobilize supporters and volunteers in order to increase the popularity of Jokowi-Ahok in the cyberspace. The ensuing surge in exposure and popularity led many tech-savvy and cyber-active voters to rally behind Jokowi-Basuki, as compared to other candidates. Their support materialised by voting for Jokowi-Basuki, which compelled the pair to be the elected Governor and Deputy Governor of Jakarta for the 2012-2017 period (Harvens, 2013). This has shown how democratic institutions that are promoting civil and politics rights are actually utilised by the public, especially the middle class, not through conventional means such as political parties and organizations, but through social media -- and this tool proved to be very effective for Jokowi-Ahok’s ultimate victory.

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Third factor is the figure and image of the gubernatorial candidates in the eyes of voters. Another analysis that is equally

important is Jokowi’s image in the eyes of society. Jokowi was seen as someone who brought hope (for a change). In addition, Jokowi was known as an inspiring leader. When he became the Mayor of Solo, Jokowi conducted traditional markets’ empowerment, supported the use of locally-built car Esemka, resisted the transformation of cultural heritage into building malls, managed the relocation of street vendors without resorting to violence, and created a couple of other changes (White Rose, 2012). The positive image for the Mayor of Solo was amplified by the mass media, and adding to that is the fact that Jokowi received a couple of awards for his efforts. One of them is the Third Best Mayor Worldwide in the World Mayor Project 2012 organised by The City Mayors Foundation, a foundation for the world’s mayor based in the UK. Meanwhile, when Ahok was a Regent for Bangka Belitung, he displayed good public performance anchored by honesty, cleanliness, and community service. His family pedigree was also a boost factor, given how Ahok’s family -- with his father known as a prominent businessman and philanthropist -- is credited for its empathy for and assistance to common people of Bangka Belitung. Thus, their respective good track record as statesmen served as their “social capital” base, determining their election triumph in Jakarta.

Fourth factor is the smear attacks from the opposing camp, which counterintuitively raised positive views and sympathy for Jokowi-Ahok team. Negative campaign attacks, including a call for people to not vote for a non-Muslim (with Ahok as target), did not affect the 85% Muslim Jakarta voters.² This shows how the voters in Jakarta 2012 Election displayed a political “maturity” to not fall for such divisive populist language adopted by the incumbent -- and instead choosing new and progressive leaders. The public managed to see, interpret and then decide their choices rationally.

¹Some characteristics of a large proportion of the middle class, among others: the majority of its citizens have high school education and above; income per capita on average has reached 10 thousand dollars per year, well above the national average (that is about 3-4 thousand dollars) and exposure on news in the mass media is the highest compared to other regions of Indonesia.

²Tobias Basuki, “Jakarta’s gubernatorial elections: lessons for Indonesian democracy”, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/09/13/jakartas-gubernatorial-elections-lessons-for-indonesian-democracy/> retrieved on 8 July 2013, 5am (GWT+8)

Conclusion

Although there have been many published analyses, particularly by polling institutions, which interpreted the results of Jakarta *Pemilukada* as an anomaly, rather than indicative of a broader trend, we saw how the elections results overturned initial projections by very same institutions. Though there is a lack of similar precedence, it seems that the recent gubernatorial elections suggest that in the future it will be more difficult to win the public vote if candidates only rely on the power of capital and bureaucracy, and more so if it is just a result of transactional politics at the elite level without taking into account public preferences. This is a proof that in fact democracy is essentially the government by, of and for the people.

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Lessons from the 2013 Philippine Elections

MON CASIPLE

Introduction

The 2013 Philippine midterm national and local elections were, by Philippine standards, quite different from other such elections. For one, there was no national opposition to speak of. Second, it was, to a large extent dictated by the requirements of the next presidential elections in 2016. Third, the elections for elective positions in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) were synchronized to the midterm elections.

The 2013 elections therefore qualify as an important political preparation for the more important 2016 elections. However, these also defined the limits of the elite-dominated Philippine democracy. At the same time, these indicated the crucial paths of democratic Left politics in future elections, and even in the pursuit of democratic political power.

This essay will endeavour to draw the lessons of the 2013 national and local elections from the point of view of progressive Left politics. The latter is defined by the requirements of political empowerment of the basic sectors and their capability for struggle in the electoral arena. Hopefully, these lessons will serve to help develop a coherent and unified political strategy of the democratic Left in future political struggles within the context of the post-Marcos democracy.

The Political Landscape

The contest for political power in the Philippine post-Marcos elite democracy is done through periodic elections. The various elite factions do this through their attendant political parties, negotiations or alliances with other national and local political families

and clans, and their access to funds and other resources, whether in government or in private spheres.

These factions contest, during the election period, for votes, specifically for votes of the vast majority of the people—the urban and rural poor. As such, these factions routinely use money, violence, cheating, and media manipulation to gain advantage and votes. The poor are largely passive objects in these electoral exercises and are confined to the act of voting, whether independently or as a consequence of the above malpractices.

The 2013 elections were conducted at the middle of the Aquino administration, who gained power through the 2010 presidential elections. It is sometimes called a mid-term elections and politically important as an assessment of performance of the ruling regime.

The Aquino administration went into the elections with an unprecedented popularity rating of around 70 percent approval. It maintained this rating throughout its first three years based on the public perception of its reformist political will in going after grand corruption in government, especially the ones under its immediate predecessor, the Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo administration. It is also based on the hope that the Aquino administration can fulfill its promises of making significant gains against poverty.

The Aquino popularity translated into a huge electoral advantage, with practically no elite faction daring to take it on frontally. The only political forces who contested the administration, in their campaigns, were the much-weakened Lakas-CMA identified with former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and the Makabayan coalition party

identified with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Both did not figure in any significant way in the national elections.

The ruling coalition split into two electoral factions, reflected in the creation of two contesting senatorial slates. Team PNoy, on the one hand, is composed of Aquino's Liberal Party, his uncle's Danding Cojuangco's Nationalist People's Coalition (NPC), and former presidential candidate and now Senator Manuel Villar's (Nacionalista Party. The United Nationalist Alliance (UNA), on the other hand, is composed of Vice-President Binay's *Partido ng Demokratiko Pilipino-Laban ng Bayan*

(PDP-Laban) and former President's Estrada's *Partido ng Masang Pilipino* (PMP).

The split exposed the start of the realignment along the candidacies of Vice-President Binay and that of the Liberal Party for presidency in the 2016 presidential election. It also indicates the start of the campaign for the loyalty of local power holders situated in the political families, clans, and dynasties at various levels along the divide of the presidential candidacies.

Of course, all these will change, as more presidential candidates appear in the

horizon, such as Senator Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. (NP). At the moment, it is a good indicator of the continuity of the traditional elite-based politics. There are no presidential candidate and no elite political faction yet who represent genuine social and political transformation that has come forward, even the Aquino brand of elitist populism.

The 2013 elections have turned out to be another chapter of the traditional patronage politics that has come to dominate the post-Marcos democracy.

There are no presidential candidate and no elite political faction yet who represent genuine social and political transformation that has come forward, even the Aquino brand of elitist populism.





Photo by: Richard Grimaldo

Opportunities and Pitfalls

Despite the hold of traditional elite-based politics on the 2013 elections, there were discernible indications of a progressive, mass-based democratic politics in transition. These were seen in the electoral successes of democratic Left candidates and parties, in the active participation of more people, including the middle classes, in election monitoring, citizen-voter education, and in anti-cheating, anti-violence, and anti-vote-buying operations, and in the issue-based voting in some local elections.

There is a significant number of voters who are prepared to vote for reform or alternative candidates, as shown by President Aquino's own landslide election in 2010 and his continued popularity based on a platform of reform. There is also the phenomenon of individual reform candidates winning or making a creditable showing in the elections.

However, the degree of reform consciousness is still very much at a low level. The major problem is that basic or societal reform does not have a widely-acceptable face or is not yet identified with a real reform political force. The broad masses of workers and peasants, the middle classes, and the marginalized sectors who desire political and social reforms do not have their own political center.

Ironically, the traditional center for social change, the Left forces in the Philippines, is not in a position to provide the necessary leadership for a reform agenda that is readily acceptable to the broad masses of workers and peasants, the middle classes, and the marginalized sectors.

The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)—historically the major Left political force—has been stymied for the past two decades by a moribund armed struggle which is increasingly at odds with its proxy participation in the electoral and parliamentary struggle. Ironically, this has led to a situation where its army is used to coerce voters and financiers in the election, and its parliamentary cadres placed in a defensive position due to the continued armed guerrilla actions.

Elite democracy is unstable democracy precisely because it is not genuine democracy. The only positive way out is its transformation into a genuine broad-based democracy.

The non-CPP democratic Left movement—which includes *Akbayan*, other Left party-list groups, and sectoral-based organizations—is also beset by disunities, weak organizing, and lack of resources. Collectively, it may be a significant political force, as shown by *Akbayan's* inclusion in Team PNoy and the various elective and appointive positions it occupies in government.

However, the democratic Left has to tackle the problem of reform leadership even as it presents itself as the Left alternative to the people. It has to effectively build its own leadership of the Left constituency vis-a-vis the sectarian CPP alternative. It also has to effectively place its own basic reform agenda before the people and unmask the shallow reforms that the various elite factions offer.

It means going beyond the electoral process and assuming an aggressive 24/7 political organizing, coalition-building, and issue organizing side-by-side with the people.

Future of Elite Democracy

Elite democracy in the Philippines, represented by the current post-Marcos “people power” democracy, cannot maintain itself for long. It has been buffeted from the start by pressures from both extreme Right and extreme Left, the various political and economic crises, and its own perversion of democracy.

The dangers of another dictatorship or an autocratic rule, as well as the rise of armed revolution are always around the corner. Elite democracy is unstable democracy precisely because it is not genuine democracy. The only positive way out is its transformation into a genuine broad-based democracy.



Photo by: Richard Grimaldo

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A pyrrhic victory: Understanding Malaysia's 13th General Election

ZAIRIL KHIR JOHARI

How Pakatan Rakyat won but still lost

As the dust of Malaysia's 13th General Election began to settle, the picture soon became clear. The Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition had managed to cling on to power, though the Prime Minister's expression during his victory speech did not give the impression of a man who had just won. On the other hand, the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition's electoral defeat, having won 89 seats or a mere 40 per cent of the total 222 parliamentary seats, just did not feel right to anyone who had participated in the election. This is because it wasn't right.

Final statistics confirmed that PR had won a commanding 51 per cent of the popular vote, a share that would have been more than enough to win power in any other similar first-past-the-post Westminster-style democracy. Yet the ruling BN had swept 60 per cent of the seats with only 47 per cent of the popular vote.

Suddenly, Malaysians knew how Al Gore felt thirteen years ago, except that a 266 to 271 loss in electoral college votes with a 48.4 per cent share of the popular vote as opposed to George W Bush's 47.9 per cent does not quite compare to the situation in Malaysia, where Pakatan Rakyat can boast of a clean majority – the first ever by an opposition coalition.

The fact is that the grossly disproportionate correlation between popular votes and seats won is a legacy stemming from five decades of gerrymandering, mal-apportionment and worst of all, the erosion of constitutional safeguards

Photo by: Hitoribocchi



The results of the 13th General Election of course now stands as the clearest proof that the existing electoral system is a broken one. The fact is that the grossly disproportionate correlation between popular votes and seats won is a legacy stemming from five decades of gerrymandering, mal-apportionment and worst of all, the erosion of constitutional safeguards meant to prevent the very same irrational variances that have occurred today.

When the Federal Constitution was formulated 56 years ago, Parliamentary seats were divided along two guiding principles: firstly, that each state would be divided into constituencies based on its population and number of voters, and secondly, that the number of voters in each constituency should not stray by more than 15 per cent of the average in its state.

The 15 per cent deviation flexibility was to allow for rural weightage and ostensibly fairer representation for those in less accessible areas. However, this 15 per cent deviation was increased to 100 per cent in 1962, and removed altogether in 1973. As a result, we now have an irrational and wayward variance in number of voters from seat to seat, such as Putrajaya (15,971 voters),¹ Igan (17,771), Lubok Antu (19,303) and the ministerial seat of Padang Rengas (28,518), compared to Gombak (123,290), Serdang (133,139) and Kapar (144,159).

In other words, voters in certain areas (such as Putrajaya or Igan) have eight to nine times more value than voters in other areas (such as Serdang or Kapar), a situation which does not serve democracy well.

This discrepancy is true even between Parliamentary seats in the same state (something which would have been prohibited by the original 15 then 100 per cent deviation caveat). For example, Kapar (144,159 voters) has four times the number of voters as its Selangor counterpart Sabak Bernam (37,318).

While an attempt could be made to justify some of the inconsistencies by



Photo by: James Gordon

reason of the urban-rural dynamic, in particular seats such as Igan and Lubok Antu in Sarawak and even to a certain extent Sabak Bernam in Selangor, there is nothing that can explain why Baling, a semi-urban seat in Kedah has 74,698 voters, which is far more than the 57,313 voters in the urban Kedah state capital of Alor Setar.

The only explanation is a political one – Baling is known to be an opposition stronghold while Alor Setar has traditionally been won by the BN. It is only when we apply this same consideration that the variance in the Sabak Bernam-Kapar case makes sense. Hence, it is no surprise to find that the other examples with larger voter populations such as Serdang and Gombak are also traditional PR seats, while seats with far fewer voters such as Putrajaya, Igan, Lubok Antu and Padang Rengas are affiliated to the BN.

Simply put, severe gerrymandering and mal-apportionment has resulted not from a need to balance the urban-rural divide, but from a conscious BN policy to both reduce the effectiveness of PR voters as well as to make it infinitely harder for the opposition to win.

As a result, the average PR constituency has 77,655 voters while the average BN

constituency has 46,510 (based on the recent General Election). In short, every PR parliamentarian has had to shake more hands and visit far more houses in order to win.

As a corollary from this, the principle of seat-assignment based on state population has also been compromised. For example, Selangor with 2.05 million voters is divided into 22 Parliamentary seats, which is lesser than Johor (26 seats with 1.60 million voters) and Perak (24 seats with 1.41m voters).

In this regard, it is again no coincidence that Selangor, being a PR stronghold (PR currently enjoys a two-thirds majority in the state assembly), is the most under-represented state, while Johor, one of the most over-represented states, is a BN bastion.

Hence, despite such systemic barriers and challenges, notwithstanding all other electoral irregularities such as the use of less-than-indelible ink, dubious voter rolls, biased media coverage, abuse of state machinery and the blatant vote-buying that took place throughout the campaign, it is a wonder in itself that Pakatan Rakyat managed to win 51 per cent of the popular vote. One can only imagine what the result would have been had the system been fairer.

¹Putrajaya may be the only acceptable exception, bearing in mind it is a standalone Federal Territory.

The Chinese witch-hunt

The results of the 13th General Election means that the ruling Barisan Nasional will have to contend with two facts: that they would have lost badly were it not for the heavily distorted distribution of voters in their favour in addition to other electoral irregularities, and that they had, despite their massive resources and machinations, effectively lost the support of a resounding majority of Malaysians.

Realisation of the above is critical if the BN has any intention of regaining lost ground. Unsurprisingly, their actions post-election reveal that they are more content to retreat into a defensive shell.

Two days after the historic General Election, the BN-controlled mainstream media began an offensive against the minority Chinese electorate. Taking the cue from Prime Minister Dato' Sri Najib Razak's own statement which blamed the results on a "Chinese tsunami" that threatened to polarise and endanger the nation, two national Malay dailies ran extremely provocative and racially-charged headlines, namely "What more do Chinese want" (Utusan Malaysia) and "Chinese voters are two-faced" (Kosmo!).

This was quickly followed up with belligerent rhetoric by prominent personalities such as a former Appeals Court judge warning the Chinese to brace against possible backlash for betraying the BN, as well as a public university pro-Chancellor openly calling for the abolishment of vernacular Chinese and Tamil schools. Topping it all was none other than the grand old man of Malaysian politics himself, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir, who claimed that the BN's poor performance was due to the "ungrateful Chinese" who had "rejected the Malays' hand of friendship".

However, it must be pointed out that the BN's racial agenda is misplaced, for the following reasons. Firstly, the ethnic Chinese make up barely 30 per cent of total eligible voters. This means that the 51 per cent of popular votes cast for PR was clearly more than mono-ethnic in source, even if one were to assume the impossible scenario of every single Chinese voter turning out and voting for the opposition.

Secondly, Pakatan Rakyat managed to increase their majorities in the state assemblies of Penang and Selangor by picking up extra Malay-majority seats (one in Penang, six in Selangor). At the same time, Malay support for PR also saw an increase across most of its seats in these two states.

The PR coalition also nearly won the state of Terengganu, where 96 per cent of all voters are Malay. In Kelantan, another predominantly Malay state, PR

realise that their win, as it were, is less the result of strong Malay support than it is the result of an electoral system that has been intentionally manipulated over decades to favour them.

As summarised by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) and the Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS), two locally-accredited election observers, the 13th General Election was "partially free but not fair".

The truth is, PR had managed to gain support across the board in most urban centres, making the victory more of an "urban tsunami", if such a term is to be used.

maintained their hold on the state government with a two-thirds majority. In addition, PR also managed to gain many new Malay-majority seats from all over the country such as Alor Setar in Kedah, Sepang in Selangor, Dungun in Terengganu, Batu Pahat in Johor and a smattering of Bumiputera-majority seats in Sabah and Sarawak.

None of the above victories would have been possible if it were merely a "Chinese tsunami" as suggested by Najib. The truth is, PR had managed to gain support across the board in most urban centres, making the victory more of an "urban tsunami", if such a term is to be used.

While one cannot deny that race is still a relevant factor in Malaysian politics, the numbers don't lie. In this case, there is no doubt that the BN's unprecedented "loss" is due not so much to racial considerations but more to their inability to win over the urban population. This stems from their failure to address longstanding issues relevant to urban dwellers such as corruption, housing price inflation, lack of public transport infrastructure, spiralling household debt, stagnant economic growth and urban poverty.

Conclusion

Barisan Nasional's victory in the 13th General Election has no popular legitimacy, having lost the popular vote to Pakatan Rakyat by a convincing majority. More importantly, BN has to



Photo by: Hitoribocchi

BN leaders are now scrambling to make sense of their pyrrhic victory. However, it is disingenuous to blame the voters without first looking at themselves. It is precisely their inability to understand the modern electoral dynamics of an urbane population that has led to their fallacious racial hypothesis that effectively ignores the groundswell of Malay support for PR in many areas throughout the country.

Four years ago, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was removed as Prime Minister for losing BN's traditional two-thirds majority. This time, Dato' Sri Najib has fared worse and is now stuck with the ignominy of leading the first minority government in Malaysia's history.

Both coalitions now find themselves at a crossroads. For BN, their challenge is to find common ground with ordinary Malaysians, the majority of whom had voted for PR. As it stands, their bellicose racial theatrics appear to be setting them in the wrong direction. For PR, coalition-building remains a critical enterprise. Balancing the aspirations of the three seemingly-disparate partners (social democratic DAP, liberal democratic PKR, and Islamist PAS) will require great care and even greater restraint.

For both BN and PR, the winner come the next General Election will be the coalition which manages to position itself in the centre of mainstream Malaysian politics. This will entail articulating solutions to urban problems, spelling out a clear socio-economic agenda and steering clear of hawkish tendencies.

For PR, coalition-building remains a critical enterprise. Balancing the aspirations of the three seemingly-disparate partners (social democratic DAP, liberal democratic PKR, and Islamist PAS) will require great care and even greater restraint.

While electoral irregularities will remain a thorn towards political change, it would be at the peril of any party to ignore the need to appeal to the Malaysian middle ground. This is an especially crucial consideration taking into account the rapid pace of urbanisation, internet penetration and changing demography of new voters in the future.

Whatever the case, the future looks set to be interesting for Malaysia.

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Pakistan's Historic Elections: Prospect for Progressive Politics

DR. HASSAN NASSIR

The Pakistani elections of 2013 will remain a huge landmark in Pakistan's history. These were the first elections where a clean and peaceful transition was made from one civilian government to another. In all of Pakistan's 67 years of existence every single democratically parliament was either a victim of a coup de etat by the military or was broken up by the President. The outgoing PPP government had made a new record by being the first elected parliament to actually complete their five years term. The outcome was the election of Nawaz Sharif as Prime Minister for Pakistan for a third term with a heavy mandate in the National Assembly.

The election results as expected had many people getting upset and claiming that severe rigging had taken place. However the election commission of Pakistan did a fairly good job in ensuring that elections were relatively free and fair. The commission was headed by an impartial former judge of the supreme

court of Pakistan. Speedy tribunals have been set up to deal with disputed election results. Most foreign observers and Pakistan's own watchdog agencies have viewed these elections as the most fair and free elections to date in Pakistan. The most pleasant aspect of these elections was the turnout that exceeded 60% which is again a new record for Pakistan. This turnout showed the general fervor and trust of people in the democratic process despite the Taliban threats to bomb polling stations.

In all of Pakistan's 67 years of existence every single democratically parliament was either a victim of a coup de etat by the military or was broken up by the President.

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This renewed interest in the political process and the participation in democracy after decades of military rule proves that the Pakistani citizens have matured and are now ready to start bearing the benefits of democracy.

However to truly understand the true outcome of the elections it is necessary to view the election results of all four provinces of Pakistan. This is of utmost importance because after the 18th Constitutional Amendment done by the outgoing government, the Federal government in Islamabad has been considerably weakened and most powers have been delegated to individual provinces. Keeping this in mind we can safely say that the overall election results have favoured the right wing parties.

The largest province Punjab saw the people voting heavily for Nawaz Shariff's Party PML (N) both for national and provincial seats. This province is significantly larger in population than any other province of Pakistan so a victory in Punjab almost guarantees a

This renewed interest in the political process and the participation in democracy after decades of military rule proves that the Pakistani citizens have matured and are now ready to start bearing the benefits of democracy.

victory in the national government. The province of Punjab has almost always voted for the conservative PML (N) and continued to do so in these elections with a renewed fervor. Other Parties like PTI and PPP failed to make a dent as almost all pre-election analysis had predicted. It is pertinent to mention here that the province of Punjab is occupied primarily by people of Punjabi and Saraiki ethnicity. The PML (N) is normally viewed as a Punjabi party and supports the Saudi brand of Wahhabi Islam.

The province of Sindh saw PPP win yet again. The PPP had emerged in Pakistan

as a socialist and progressive party but quickly abandoned its agenda and started traditional conservative politics. They have continued to win in Sindh by banking on the notorious 'Sindh card', which is in essence politics of nationalism and regionalism. The other major party in Sindh is the MQM, a party that depends on the ethnic vote of the 'Urdu speaking people'.

The province of Khyber Pakhtoonkhawa (KPK) is perhaps Pakistan's most interesting province because unlike other provinces, the people of this province always vote in a different party and usually one that has never been in

power before. The province has historically gambled and swayed by voting for extreme right wing religiously fundamentalist parties to liberal socialist parties. In these elections the province of KPK saw PTI win by a bare minimum majority. PTI is the party of the world famous cricket star and philanthropist Imran Khan and was the most glorified party in media domestic and foreign. Many pre-election analysts had predicted a clean sweep for PTI where it failed miserably. PTI can be broadly defined as a reactionary party with no particular agenda or ideology but rather a statement of mistrust in other 'tried and tested' parties.

Even their slogan was 'if not us then who else'. The party had banked upon the resentment of people with the prevalent two party system of Pakistan and promised to be a third option. It is pertinent to mention here that the party support is almost entirely because of the charismatic Imran Khan. It is commonly believed throughout the pashtoon dominated KPK that Imran Khan is an ethnic pashtoon, a belief that Imran Khan never refuted. The other parties that won in KPK were JI and JUI(F) both right wing religious parties, with the latter being Taliban supporters.

Finally the province of Balochistan saw perhaps the most surprising results. The elections were dominated by PKMAP a pashtoon nationalist party, however the government was made by National Party which is a social democratic and Baloch nationalist party. The new chief minister Dr. Abdul Maalik is the first Chief Minister of Balochistan to be a middle class person in a province raging with tribal chief tans and Taliban warlords.

In summary the results of these elections show that nationalist and regionalist parties took the lead in the elections and the voters have voted firstly on the basis of ethnicity, caste and creed and secondly on the agenda of a party.

The overall dismal performance of religious parties and those of progressive and secular parties in these elections show clearly that the voters have rejected ideologies in favor of blood ties.

In summary the results of these elections show that nationalist and regionalist parties took the lead in the elections and the voters have voted firstly on the basis of ethnicity, caste and creed and secondly on the agenda of a party.

The national government and the provincial governments will carry out previous agendas without any major structural changes in the political or legal system of the country.

The lack of any ideology and the overwhelming victory of conservative forces means that the status quo will be maintained in Pakistan. The national government and the provincial governments will carry out previous agendas without any major structural changes in the political or legal system of the country.

It is expected however that this ongoing agenda will provide stability, which will usher in more foreign investments. The challenges to the present electorate are tremendous because they have inherited a country with fiscal debt in the billions, severe outages of electricity, tremendous inflation and unemployment and extremely corrupt state machinery. A country with conditions like these is fertile for the emergence of progressive political forces.

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Elections and Progressive Politics in South Asia

DR. D. K. GIRI

The general elections held last May in Pakistan have been cheering news for democrats all over the world, including those in India. Despite the threats like suicide bombing by Taliban, Pakistanis actively and massively participated in democratic elections that may prove to be a game-changer in Pakistani politics. For the first time in Pakistan's political history, there has been a smooth transition of power from one elected government to the other.

The second general elections in the new democracy of Bhutan just got over. Power changed hands from one party to the

other. There have been almost regular elections in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives. At present, Nepal is transforming into a Republic from a monarchical democracy, although drafting a Constitution and putting the democratic institutions into operation is taking time.

India is having elections round the year. It has three tiers of governance; local governments called Panchayatiraj Institutions (PRIs), state governments (India has 28 states), and the Union government. All these governments at all the three levels are elected through a universal adult franchise. Since the tenure of three levels of governments is not co-terminus, there are elections in India all the year round. One political

observer once commented, "Indian politics is electionised, if not fully democratized." The point was made in sarcasm, as, no doubt, regular and fair elections are authentic indicators of a functioning democracy. In this essay, my brief is typo comment on elections in South Asian region vis-à-vis progressive politics.

The elections in South Asian countries are less than fair. Money, muscle, mafia play a big role in elections

Photo by: Al Jazeera English



The Perceptions on Elections

There are certain perceptions about nature and substance of elections in South Asia. The elections in South Asian countries are less than fair. Money, muscle, mafia play a big role in elections. Often times, elections are won by using huge amounts of money to entice the gullible voters, and by using coercive power of local elites. Since democratic politics is mainly about securing numerical majority of Members of Parliament to form the government, political parties use caste, religion, region, and ethnicity in order to garner majority votes. Such political mobilization hardly amounts to secular or progressive politics. Such strategies throw progressive ideologies like socialism or multiculturalism out of window.



Photo by: Nilanjan Chowdhury / Al Jazeera

In particular, elections could be noisy and disorderly. Kidnapping of candidates, political murders around the elections are commonplace. In Pakistan, recent elections were somewhat violent. There have been blasts; even the kidnapping of former Prime Minister Yusuf Reza Gilani's son did not come as a surprise. In some parts of South Asia, candidates are not announced in advance lest they should be physically eliminated from the electoral race.

Second, electoral institutions are not strong enough to conduct free and fair

In some parts of South Asia, candidates are not announced in advance lest they should be physically eliminated from the electoral race.

elections. India can boast of a powerful and independent Election Commission but many other election authorities in the region are manipulated in one way or the other. Third, the use of black money in the elections has detrimental effects, as the money is later recovered from the state illicitly by those winning the

elections. Fourth, participation in elections by all segments of voting population is less effective. The inclusion of women and minorities, the rural and urban poor, indigenous people, socially marginalized, people from peripheral areas, into the electoral process is not so effective. Measures have been taken to correct the imbalance, but they are not so across the region. It is a truism that in order to make democracy genuinely representative and inclusive, people's participation needs to be effective and organized.

What has changed?

There is no gainsaying that the perceptions about democratic deficits in electoral process are born out of facts and experiences. But, there are perceptible and hopeful changes in voting patterns, electoral practices and behavior that will surely impact the nature of politics in South Asia. The most noticeable change is that voters have become far more conscious. They are expecting their respective governments to deliver on their basic needs, and developmental aspirations. They are not going to be any more swayed by bogeys and propagandas. The campaign in the recent Pakistan elections was dominated by development issues, unlike anti-India or pro-Islam propaganda in the past. The ruling Pakistan People's party was put in the dock for mismanaging the national economy. On the other hand, Nawaz Sharif, and his Muslim League got the mandate on their promise of economic reforms and liberalization. Likewise, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party government in Karnataka, the southern state of India, was voted out for its non-performance. The government was beset with intraparty conflicts and corruption. In Pakistan, the Peoples Party (PPP) had become so unpopular with its non-performance that it got relegated to the third position after Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) led by Imran Khan.

The most noticeable change is that voters have become far more conscious. They are expecting their respective governments to deliver on their basic needs, and developmental aspirations.

People have become better informed of their entitlements and scope for self-development. Any party failing to meet people's needs and aspirations will be punished at the polls. Hence, there is a shift towards a progressive political

agenda. Whether such a shift in voters' attitude has led to alternative modes of governance is early to say. Voters can punish and reward politicians in elections once in five years or so. They cannot enforce good governance in the interim. The right to recall the elected representatives is still not the practice. Secondly, voters have limited choice of parties and candidates. They have limited means or capacities to enjoin reforms in a political party. There is a need for an informed, organized, and vibrant civil society for putting pressure on political parties to change. Yet, there are hopeful signs. In India, and elsewhere, social movements have introduced major changes in the system and parties. For instance, campaign against corruption, non-performance, and reactionary forces have cost the parties elections and made them change their strategies. The Indian National Congress, the oldest and by far the biggest party, which fought most elections on social issues, has of late focused its strategy on economic growth, pro-poor development, and distributive justice and so on.

There are lingering reactionary forces that affect the electoral process. casteists, religious fundamentalists, and linguistic chauvinists, criminal elements still enter the electoral fray. But, they are gradually being outlawed. In India, one cannot seek elections on the basis of caste, religion, or appealing to any other ascriptive identity. One does so clandestinely, but if caught, they are disqualified, and even punished. The Supreme Court of India, in a recent ruling, stipulated that any one charge-sheeted or convicted will not be able to contest the elections. The use of money in elections is being checked now. During the elections to the Constitutional Assembly, Nepal introduced measures to control the campaign costs, which had positive results. In India, candidates have to declare all their assets while filing the nomination. But, putting a cap on the election expenditure is yet to come as legislation.

The Progressive Forces

The Progressive forces in South Asia are not so organized. They have an appealing agenda, but lack the unity and

The progressive forces face common challenges in South Asia- mass poverty, high levels of inequalities, neo-liberal economic policies and so on; they have to confront these challenges with the new thinking developing in social democracy.

discipline to make an impact.

Progressives across the region are divided amongst themselves. Splits and disunity have become their major weakness. They have taken internal party democracy into a ridiculous extent of indiscipline bordering on anarchy. Such tendency has become the cause of undoing of progressive forces in South Asia.

In India, for instance, the progressive leadership, to be more precise, democratic socialists, runs governments in major Indian states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Bengal and Karnataka. If they were to unite, they would any day form the government at the Centre. Their inability to band together is to do with the non-institutional character of politics in South Asia. Leaders arrogate themselves to parties as the party as an institution and an instrument suffers. The progressive forces face common challenges in South Asia- mass poverty, high levels of inequalities, neo-liberal economic policies and so on; they have to confront these challenges with the new thinking developing in social democracy.

There is another major challenge though, which I alluded to in the foregoing paragraph. This needs to be elaborated and understood. This is the grave lack of modern, organized and democratized parties, along with it, building disciplined, informed and dedicated cadres for the parties. I would, in fact, rate party building a bigger challenge than the ideological platform for the progressives. When it comes Progressive forces, we may recall the adage that "when bad people gang up, the good people do not even associate".

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The Way Forward

The Progressive forces have to form 'parties with a difference'. The organizing principles of such parties have to be modern, based on rationality, democratic where dissent is respected, discussion not disruption is the norm, and inclusive where every citizen has a chance to contribute and grow. Once the party organization is ready, it will make a difference to electoral process, by leading from the front, by leading with example.

On ideology, there is nothing better than democratic socialism based on four eternal principles of justice, equality, liberty and solidarity. These principles are timeless, but their application is, admittedly, situation- and country-specific. On electoral strategy, and tactic, the Progressive forces have to draw and align with like-minded forces from all the three sectors in any country. In order to win an election on a progressive platform, one would need political actors who will advocate for progressive pro-people policies, business communities who would produce goods and services, and civil societies, who would promote and protect values like fairness, transparency and solidarity and the like, that constitute good governance and a healthy societies. Finally, progressive politics in South Asia comes up often against traditional and feudal societies, and thus moves back and forth. South Asia, like other regions, will move smoother and faster on progressive path with a strong dose of international solidarity. South Asians progressive forces will consolidate faster if they work in unity at South Asian level. This is the dire need of the hour and way to go forward.

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Malaysia's Critical Moment: An analysis of the 13th General Elections

BOON KIA MENG

Malaysians went to the national polls for the 13th time, since the independence of the nation in 1957, on 5th May 2013. It promised to be the mother of all General Elections (GE13) in the nation's history, with the possibility of a change of ruling parties for the very first time. The prospects of regime change was as unprecedented as it was unthinkable, say 5 years ago, given the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional's (BN or National Front) unbroken 56-year reign in Malaysia (the BN is made up of the dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO), in coalition with other communal parties such as the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) & Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and other smaller parties in Peninsula Malaysia and Sabah & Sarawak. It took up its current organizational form as the BN, post-1969 emergency rule due to ethnic conflicts in Kuala Lumpur of that year).

Political opposition in the country has always been fragmented and disorganized, due to a combination of repressive state laws and the lack of resources, given the BN's power of incumbency and ability to mobilize state resources almost at will. All this began to change electorally, when in the 12th General Elections in 2008 the BN lost their customary two-thirds majority in the Federal Parliament, and also five out of thirteen state governments, an unprecedented achievement by Malaysia's opposition political parties. As a result of that success, the three main opposition parties, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), officially formed an alternative coalition called the Pakatan Rakyat (the People's Alliance), to administer their

The states of Kedah & Perak returned to BN, while the Pakatan consolidated their electoral support in the states of Penang, Selangor and Kelantan.



Photo by: Hitoribocchi

newly won state governments as well as being the Opposition to the BN in Parliament. The Pakatan Rakyat represented the strongest electoral challenge that the BN has ever faced, which explains why the recent elections were the most highly anticipated and politically explosive General Election to the Malaysian electorate and international observers, alike.

On the 5th of May, 85% of the Malaysian electorate turned out to cast their votes, a new national record. The results returned were as follows: the BN managed to return to power with 133 parliamentary seats, compared to the Pakatan Rakyat's total of 89 parliamentary seats (the Federal Parliament consists of a total 222 seats). This meant the BN's total of 140 in 2008

was reduced, while the Pakatan Rakyat improved from the 82 they had previously. In terms of state governments, the Pakatan Rakyat only managed to secure three state governments this time round, compared to the five won in 2008. The states of Kedah & Perak returned to BN, while the Pakatan consolidated their electoral support in the states of Penang, Selangor and Kelantan. On the surface, these results seem to suggest that nothing much has changed since 2008, give or take some parliamentary seats or states. It was telling that the Prime Minister, Mohammad Najib Razak, immediately characterized the poorer performance of his coalition as being down to the impact of a 'Chinese tsunami' or electoral wave against the ruling parties, when the results were first announced. This is

typical of most national discourse fostered by the ruling regime where ethnic and communal categories are fundamental to state policymaking and analysis. Certain academics, political pundits and members of the Opposition provided an alternative explanation, calling the results a 'Malaysian tsunami' instead, where there seemed to be a clear geographic antagonism developing in the Malaysian electorate, between rural and urban Malaysia, as it were (BN, especially UMNO, is still dominant in most rural seats, while the Pakatan won most urban seats).

Given these alternative interpretations and easy punditry, what kind of objective analysis or developing patterns in Malaysian politics can we preliminarily decipher from the results? What is the writing on the wall, so to speak? From my analysis, one can speak of at least three key developments in the Malaysian political order following the GE13 results. The first two have to do with key structural changes to the political landscape of the country, the direct result of accumulated social forces in the nation outpacing as it were the established political institutions & processes, since the 70s & 80s. The third and final point deals with the prospects for greater democratization or participation from the Malaysian masses and the possibility for a social democratic alternative for the nation.

Critical Elections

Firstly, the 2013 general elections has not only clarified but firmly established a key fundamental insight: the fact that 'critical elections' is now the new normal for Malaysian politics, and will remain so for some time to come. As mentioned above, elections were never this competitive in the last 56 years and any hopes on the part of UMNO-BN that the setback in 2008 was a mere blip in their otherwise imperious track record of electoral success is clearly unfounded and misconceived. The 13th General Elections were 'critical elections' in the sense that "these were elections in which voters were, at least from impressionistic evidence, unusually deeply concerned, in which the extent of electoral involvement was relatively quite high, and in which the decisive results of the voting revealed a sharp alteration of

the pre-existing cleavage within the electorate."¹ What was truly remarkable from this election was the fact the BN lost the national popular vote to the Opposition for the very first time in history. The BN won only 47% of the popular vote as compared to the Pakatan Rakyat's 51%.

Due to excessive gerrymandering and mal-apportionment of voter numbers to parliamentary seats (parliamentary constituencies range in number of voters from the smallest of 6,000 to the largest of 112,000), the BN gained their 133 seat majority in Parliament (60% of the total seats) on the back of only 47% of the popular vote. Pakatan won 40% of the total number of parliamentary seats, even though they clinched the national popular vote at 51%. A major battle is now brewing on the issue of electoral reform and also allegations of electoral fraud on the part of the ruling regime as well as the Election Commission. At the time of writing, the Pakatan Rakyat has filed a legal suit against the Election Commission (EC) to dispute the fairness of the elections as well as seeking the dismissal of senior officials in the EC. It would be fair to say that this upsurge of interest and participation of the Malaysian electorate in GE13 would not have reached the present levels if not for

the efforts of a civil society movement for free and fair elections called BERSIH (which means 'clean' in English) since 2007. Through their street demonstrations and pressuring of the Malaysian government and the EC, the citizenry has been energized and made aware of their rights as voters.

In spite of the moral victory for the oppositional forces, the results also revealed the immense and powerful hold that UMNO still has on the predominantly Malay rural heartland of Malaysia. This dominance is of huge import particularly in the former Borneo states of Sabah & Sarawak where UMNO and fellow BN component parties scored a resounding victory. The opposition failed to match pre-election sentiments, winning only in selected urban seats in a part of Malaysia which is still largely rural in nature. This is due to what elections observer, Edward Aspinall has called UMNO's 'triumph of the machine'. In his words: "Often, Malaysia's politics is written about as if ethnicity is the only thing that matters. Viewed from the rural hinterland, politics look rather different. Viewed up close, it is machine politics and the mobilisation of money that make all the difference, and that constitute the key for the BN's victory."²

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Photo by: Hitoribocchi

Crisis of Political Organization & Legitimacy

If we trace the development of Malaysian politics from a longer-term perspective, I would argue that the GE results, as well as the social antagonisms developing in Malaysian society, represents the exhaustion of the post-1969 New Economic Policy (NEP) regime, which has made ethno-politics the main determinant in state policy and national discourse. The NEP set about to eradicate poverty and restructure society on the basis of affirmative action for the Malay-Bumiputera (sons of the soil) majority in the country. On many counts it was a success in reducing absolute poverty among Malaysians. The social forces that were set in motion by the NEP had since spawned major contradictions in Malaysian society such as intra-ethnic inequalities, particularly among the Malays. Political economist Terence Gomez opined that "It is no longer about ethnicity. It is a class war in Malaysia. We are seeing conflict within the Malays and within other races that is class based."³

Such socio-economic developments lay at the root of my argument that what we are witnessing, and the GE13 results are symptomatic of this fact, is a fundamental crisis of the Malaysian state. What this means is that UMNO-BN has suffered an irreversible blow to their political hegemony, one that thrived on state capitalism, a politics of patrimony and a subservient electorate. The abysmal performance by the BN component parties, particularly the MCA and the MIC, point to the fact that the ruling classes are struggling at the moment to find a viable political organization to restore a stable political order that they have enjoyed since the nation's independence. A natural result has been the recent spate of sedition charges against NGO activists and opposition politicians, a clear sign that the state is resorting to repression when popular consent is not forthcoming.⁴ State coercion can only lead to further delegitimation of a political regime already in crisis.

Challenges for Democracy & the Social Democratic Alternative

The present fluid state of the Malaysian political scene presents a number of major challenges for the key political actors, and for progressive and

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democratic forces in the country, in particular. What further changes or political moves can we expect on the immediate horizon? I will set out five such challenges to Malaysian democracy as I see it, and they are tentative in nature.

The first immediate challenge would be the further neoliberalization of national economic policies under the BN government. Malaysia ranks as one of the most unequal societies in Asia, with a Gini coefficient of 0.44, together with household debt levels at 81% of national GDP and stagnating wages among the working class.⁵ The impending introduction of the Goods & Services Tax (GST) is but one of a plethora of economic policies that will burden the majority of Malaysians. These policies will exacerbate class antagonisms in the country as mentioned above, where the top 10% of Malaysian households per capita control 35% of the country's wealth, while the bottom 40% own only 8%.⁶

This actually leads to a second challenge, one that the Opposition, Pakatan Rakyat, has to meet and soon. Many commentators felt that the Pakatan failed to win the elections due to an incoherent policy agenda that was riddled with piece-meal, populist measures. Given the current socio-economic climate and the BN's economic philosophy, this is a strategic moment for the Pakatan Rakyat to really draw the line, differentiate themselves from the ruling regime by charting a new, possibly social democratic alternative agenda for the nation. A focus on structural reforms that lead towards fairer redistributive policies is much



needed and in keeping with the aspirations of the majority of the electorate who voted for them, especially those in urban areas facing rising living costs. Will the Pakatan do it? That is the challenge.

Third, a possible emboldening of Malay nationalism and reactionary politics is on the cards given the fact that UMNO actually won more seats this time, in comparison to the poor performance of other BN parties. Clive Kessler, a veteran academic who has observed Malaysian politics for decades, has argued that race and particularly a more belligerent form of Malay nationalism may take centre stage in Malaysian politics, given the campaign strategies carried out by UMNO during GE13, a message that preys of Malay anxiety and fear of losing those formal Bumiputera privileges.⁷ Of the three parties within Pakatan Rakyat, the Islamist PAS fared poorly compared to the others, fueling the possibility of internal factional struggles that may see a return of a similar emphasis on Malay nationalism, albeit infused with political Islam. Kessler warned that we may yet see a possible realignment of social forces, forces that would accentuate the twin identities of Malay ethnicity and Islamism.

Fourth, further pressures is expected to develop in terms of states and federal relations, in the context of Malaysia's years of centralization of powers and executive dominance, particularly the office of the Prime Minister. In many ways, the Parliament has long been sidelined due to the BN's unchallenged dominance in all branches of the state. The increased number of Pakatan MPs has surely shaken things up in the



Photo by: Isabel Esterman

legislative bodies, not to mention the three state legislatures under their control. There is also now a clear realization on the part of UMNO that Sabah and Sarawak are central to the BN's survival as the ruling coalition. More ministers from these two states were appointed in the latest cabinet announced by the Prime Minister. It remains to be seen if these two resource rich states will finally reverse years of underdevelopment, having served as the economic periphery to the central core, based in Kuala Lumpur.

Lastly, more than ever before, the Malaysian electorate faces the challenge of pressing forward their new-found role as the real subjects or actors in politics, rather than being mere objects of policy that the ruling classes have long expected them to be. These elections have acted as another catalyst in the shaping of popular democratic consciousness, with a new generation of voters swept by the recent electoral fever (48% of Malaysia's population is under 25 years old). There will be agitations for the return of local democracy in the form of town and municipal elections

and for greater forms of participatory democracy in the political processes of the nation (local municipal elections were abolished in 1964 due to national security reasons). Similarly, the people will demand for effective electoral reforms, especially to redraw parliamentary constituencies with a fairer distribution of voter numbers to give substance to the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty.

What are the odds for the Malaysian people in facing up and proving themselves equal to these challenges? The answer: "Hic Rhodus, hic salta! Here is the rose, here dance!"⁸

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¹ V.O. Key, 'A Theory of Critical Elections', *The Journal of Politics*, 17 (1955), p. 4.

² <http://inside.org.au/triumph-of-the-machine/#sthash.38wG06e9.dpuf>

³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/02/malaysia-politics-idUSL3NoDG0P320130502>

⁴ See my article on the New Mandala for an analysis of the recent arrests of politicians and activists: <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2013/05/24/then-they-came-for-adam-adli/>

⁵ <http://www.thestar.com.my/Business/Business-News/2013/03/21/Bank-Negara-measures-to-ensure-Msian-household-debt-remains-manageable.aspx>

⁶ Study on Malaysian wealth inequality by Muhammed Abdul Khalid, PhD: <http://www.ukm.my/fep/perkem/pdf/perkemVI/PERKEM2011-1-3A2.pdf>

⁷ UMNO won 89 seats in 2013, compared to 79 in 2008. <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2013/06/12/malysias-ge13-what-happened-what-now-part-1/>

⁸ Karl Marx, 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.

How has the Left fared in recent Elections: The Philippine Experience

EMMAN HIZON¹

A renowned German philosopher² once said that if there is one thing that the left has gained from participating in elections, it is the “second to none” barometer to measure its strength as opposed to its opponents as well as its influence over the working people. He explained that if the elections’ only use for progressives were to provide them with a tool of analysis to gauge their political relevance, it would be more than enough. The same can be said of the country’s recently concluded midterm elections, which saw, in varying degrees, the participation of different leftist and progressive groups.

Then again, we are not only interested in examining the different left-leaning groups’ strength and influence among the masses, but we are also very interested in how the electoral terrain has shaped these groups, particularly those that have seriously espoused free and open electoral participation as well as other forms of democratic

involvement -- and their appreciation of this arena and how they will strengthen and/or rethink their strategies and tactics as they take advantage of the opportunities presented to them.

The Philippine left is not new to elections dominated by the elite. But in an arena where the traditional politicians (*trapo*)³ and political dynasties⁴ waged a heavyweight fight, as manifested by the 2013 polls, the stack is placed heavily against the Left. Thus, how the different left groups navigated the “treacherous waters” of the 2013 elections is worth assessing.

2013 Was not a Reform Election

The arena where the Left waged its electoral battles in is very different from the 2010 elections when the people effectively ended Arroyo’s nine-year reign. Political analyst Mon Casiple was correct when he said that the 2013 election was not a “reform election.” Casiple argued that it was an election run along a clear *trapo* frame. Thus, it is not surprising that it was one of the most expensive elections in the country’s

political history, whereby majority of those who won were from the ranks of *trapos* and political dynasties.

While it could be argued that the 2010 election was conducted within the confines of the same elite democracy, it was indeed different from the 2013 polls, since the elements and conditions that were evident in our electoral exercise three years ago were not present in the midterm elections. Back then the elite was pressed against the wall in choosing between muzzling the electorate’s voice to extend Arroyo’s reign through fielding a political proxy, on one hand, or court an extra-constitutional path to change, on the other. In contrast, the elite didn’t have that dilemma in the midterm race.

More so, the defining theme of the 2010 election revolved around what Sociologist Randy David called a “moral crusade.” Three years ago, the lines were clear: it was a battle between good and evil, where good was represented by Aquino and his “*tuwid na daan* governance” (straight/righteous path), on one hand, and evil was personified by “VillArroyo”⁵ and everything that was



associated with it, on the other. That important element was played out of sync in the 2013 midterm elections, as the "moral card" flew in the face of the Team PNoy slate, especially since some of its members were seen as enemies of Aquino's *tuwid na daan*. As such, even as Aquino maintained his image as a clean and upright politician, he effectively lost his command of the moral high ground. Worse, it obfuscated the electorate's choices. And in such a muddy electoral field, traditional and patronage politics reigned supreme.

Although not a reform election, the 2013 polls, the first electoral exercise under Aquino's watch, sharply contrasted with the 2007 elections under Arroyo when the state undertook a campaign of systematic harassment against the Left. At the very least, the midterm elections gave the Left a breathing space of sorts -- a relatively more peaceful electoral arena to participate and strengthen itself. The 2013 election, as the first under the Aquino government, should serve as the Left's yardstick on how well it moved forward since 2010 and how it has strengthened itself since then.

Akbayan

Based on Comelec's official count, Akbayan received 830,000 votes or 3.10% of the party-list⁶ votes in the latest elections. This is a bit lower than the 1,061,947 votes (3.62%) it got in 2010. Though its votes were slightly lower, they were more than enough to retain its two partylist seats in Congress. It has also successfully acquired new constituencies with the election of former Akbayan Rep. Kaka Bag-ao as the new district representative of Dinagat Islands. Its senatorial candidate, Risa Hontiveros, garnered close to 11 million votes, the best showing so far of any left-leaning senatorial candidate in the history of Philippine elections. Although she failed to win a senate seat, she was able to increase her votes by as much as 2 million, compared to the 9 million votes she got in 2010 when she first ran for the senate.

Makabayan bloc

Meanwhile, the extreme left, represented by the Makabayan bloc⁷ and led by Bayan Muna and Gabriela Partylists, managed to

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maintain its base votes of 3-4 million votes which enabled it to retain its 7 seats in Congress. However, several of its partylist groups such as Migrante, Akap Bata and Katribu lost, automatically barring them from running in the next election. Its performance in the partylist election was more or less reflected by the votes that its senatorial candidate, Teddy Casino, got from his senatorial campaign. Casino reaped 4 million votes, slightly higher than the votes garnered by Satur Ocampo and Lisa Maza, whom they fielded to run as senators under the slate of defeated presidential candidate Sen. Manny Villar in 2010.

Other left initiatives

There were also other groups from the democratic left⁸ and/or civil society community that participated in the election. Groups like Sanlakas, which tried to make an electoral comeback,

Anak Mindanao (AMIN), Alliance of Rural Concerns (ARC), Umalab Ka, Kaakbay, Ang Nars and Ating Guro all participated in the partylist race. But with the exemption of AMIN and Ang Nars, which respectively won a single partylist seat, the rest failed to muster enough votes to pass the 2 percent

“Serious and sustained electoral projects”

From the results of the 2013 elections, despite the tremendous odds imposed by the elite, it is evident that Akbayan and the Makabayan bloc have established themselves as the two most serious and sustained electoral projects coming from the left community. It also demonstrated that they have significant mass bases that can "passively accumulate power" under a non-revolutionary situation and use it as leverage as they navigate an electoral process dominated by the elite.

But a closer scrutiny of the votes of the two left formations will tell us more. From afar, Makabayan's capacity to maintain its vote base is quite impressive. On its votes alone, it is easy to see that the Makabayan bloc is four times bigger than Akbayan. However, Akbayan has a better position to reach out to "new publics" with its capacity to attract market votes or votes outside its usual political base as clearly seen in Hontiveros' close to 11 million votes. For the second time, Hontiveros has gone beyond the 1 million baseline votes of Akbayan and has even managed to substantially increase her votes. This is contrary to the votes garnered by Casino which was within the ambit of his allied partylist groups' base votes.

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Makabayan's bigger vote base, Akbayan's "potential to attract and expand"

As such, while Makabayan may have a bigger mass base as compared to Akbayan, it has repeatedly failed to expand its sphere of influence among the masses. It entered and exited the 2010 and 2013 electoral contests with the same mass base. This may be the result of the general public's negative perception of the group which has failed to manage its electoral and armed-militant image – one which many are saying is increasingly becoming a divisive issue inside the bloc. Nevertheless, Makabayan's vote base would still be of great value as it leverages its position ahead of the 2016 elections. But unless it rethinks its electoral strategy and effectively manages its armed and legal characteristics to optimally catch the attention of new voters, it will be trapped within the usual trapo wheeling and dealing as it contents itself to sell its mass base either as electoral machinery or additional votes for trapos.

This is where Akbayan has the advantage. Despite having a smaller political base, Akbayan has shown its "potential" to reach out to new constituencies, thus, opens opportunities to enlarge its mass base and better position itself as a viable left alternative worthy of the voters' support. This is especially true with Hontiveros. Risa's political branding, choice of messages and issues since 2010 may have contributed to the voting public's more favorable attitude towards her. This is despite the fact that Hontiveros' camp failed to sustain her political branding in the recent senatorial election, which together with other factors contributed to the overall inability to land a senate seat.

But then again, because of Akbayan's failure⁹ to fully exploit the perceived and real advantages that went along with its electoral alliance with Aquino, its attempt to rise from the political margins and become a full-fledged mainstream progressive political party has become more difficult. Like the Makabayan, Akbayan must rethink its strategy of engaging a national campaign vis-à-vis its partylist participation. One important thrust is to invest more on its territorial organizing especially with the party winning around a hundred local government seats¹⁰ and even a district congressional representative. Unless it rapidly and with care addresses its organizational limitations and firms up its political base, it will find it extremely hard to harness the full benefits of being a coalition partner of Aquino. How Akbayan will harness Hontiveros' votes and convert them into clear political bailiwicks leading to 2016 is something worth observing.

Weak political base

The performance of other groups from the democratic left bloc is also very telling as it exposed its weak political base. This is very problematic as the partylist election is primarily about organized votes sourced from solid political bases. This is not like the senatorial election where 70 percent of the campaign is dictated by "airwar" while the remaining 30 percent is devoted to the ground campaign. In the partylist election, the opposite may be true. While a number of partylist groups

have started to launch their own air campaigns, the race is still largely dictated by the ground.

Furthermore, the partylist race has become tighter and more competitive with the strong showing of regional partylist groups with clear political bailiwicks. Since 2007, territorial and regional partylist groups have significantly taken away votes from many left-leaning "national" partylist groups in their respective base-provinces. As such, together with weak or dwindling mass bases, demleft partylist groups are hard put to get votes from areas where the regional partylist groups are based. Obviously, confined to their own electoral initiatives not anchored by a clear political project, the different demleft groups have found it difficult to win seats in the partylist election.

But the process of imagining a political-electoral project must go beyond the usual "coming together" of different democratic left forces and other progressives like what has been done in the past. What the democratic left needs to do is set objectives beyond its "business as usual" engagement in elections and look at other arenas aside from the partylist system. The local political scene is one potential arena.

This is not like the senatorial election where 70 percent of the campaign is dictated by "airwar" while the remaining 30 percent is devoted to the ground campaign. In the partylist election, the opposite may be true.



Local elections: Prospects for the democratic left

As they say, the chain breaks where it is weakest. Arguably, the elite's position in the national scene is significantly different from what they face in the local arena. Sometimes the people just need to be presented with strong and viable options to discard the trapos. This has been proven by the election of progressive leaders to district, provincial and municipal posts. Notable of these were the "iconic electoral battles" waged and won by former Akbayan Rep. and newly elected Dinagat Representative Kaka Bag-ao over the Ecleos; Akbayan Los Banos Mayor Ceasar Perez against the Genuinos; Leni Robredo against the Villafuertes, and the late Dr. Jay Pernes against the Fuas of Siquijor. Although their triumphs pale in comparison to the victories of the trapos, the lesson is clear: even as the trapos and political clans wield tremendous political power, they can still be beaten. And the people's chances of defeating them are far better in the local electoral front, as demonstrated by Akbayan's recent performance.

But aside from Akbayan and a few others who have tried to invest in the local elections, the local arena is still largely untapped by the left. This is despite the enormous opportunities presented by this arena for the left to build support from the "bottom up." The local arena, notwithstanding the dominion of the national government, has proven that it is a worthwhile platform to implement important policy decisions on local matters as well as act as a good gauge of local opinion. The local also provides opportunities for the democratic left to mobilize the voting public outside of elections on issues like the environment, health, living wage, humane housing, and living pensions for the elderly, among others; and a greater chance of presenting an alternative approach to local and national issues.

In other countries, the local arena is a strong bastion of different left groups that are out of main halls of power. This was the example set by the PT in Brazil before it captured top-executive power; and by several other leftist political parties in Europe and Latin America as well. Unfortunately, this is not the case

in the Philippines. Marginalized from the core, the democratic left is also out of the local bastions of power. Even with Akbayan's few seats in the executive, and more or less a hundred local government politicians, the broad democratic left is still largely in the political margins; a voice in the wilderness wielding too little political influence to actually matter. This is the challenge to the democratic left community.

Social alliances

Yet, while an alliance of different left groups in the local arena is necessary, it is not sufficient. The democratic left needs to enter into new alliances outside of its political circles such as with reform-oriented groups and other middle class organizations that do not necessarily consider themselves as progressives but have established themselves as distinct political forces.

This could also be applied to a certain degree to some traditional political parties that can be united around a minimum reform agenda. Many of these can be found in areas where anti-political dynasty battles were waged. The immediate agenda is not to have a simple coming together of existing left organizations but rather to build unity and "social/cross-class alliances" in the local area among significant sections of the working people, young people, business and the middle forces.

The message of the 2013 election is clear: The democratic left must build strong political bailiwicks to establish local centers of power. It is also necessary to support a national electoral project like the fielding of a senatorial candidate akin to the campaign mounted by Hontiveros. If there is one important thing that we have learned from Hontiveros' senatorial run it is that the elite's hold of the national election is still very strong,



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perhaps even stronger in the midterm elections where we saw a “revenge” of traditional and patronage politics. Unless a national reform candidate has the backing of strong political bailiwicks from the local that would guarantee her/him ample votes, that candidate will not stand a chance against the *trapos* in the national arena.

Left bailiwicks

Furthermore, building strong leftist bailiwicks is indispensable as we prepare for the scenario of liberal democratic collapse, opening the path for extra-constitutional change. This is especially true in the case of the Philippines. Since the first “people power revolution” in 1986, which toppled the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, in the span of twenty years the country was rocked by several major social upheavals that deposed President Joseph Estrada and almost caused the collapse of the Arroyo government.¹¹

Hence, our local bailiwicks must not only be prepared in the electoral battle but also to lead in the event of a strong and sudden political change in society. To paraphrase Akbayan’s narrative paper,¹² let us remember that we always seek and aim for a critical mass, which at a conjunctural moment, when objective and subjective factors favorably meet and complement each other, should be directed towards a qualitative leap in the struggle. This could either be a significant electoral victory or a revolutionary upheaval leading to a fundamental change in government.

Whatever the scenario may be, we must pace the way for the emergence of clear leftist bailiwicks. The local arena must become a laboratory for the democratic left and its numerous experiments -- and a training ground for good governance and new militant struggles.

Where to, partylist?

The idea of the partylist system is to help establish strong political parties that could, in the future, compete in mainstream politics. But given how the partylist race is being conducted, especially in light of the three-seat cap (the inequitable computation of total

partylist votes cast per election) and the entry of *trapos*, among other issues, the tendency is for groups to break apart to gather more seats in Congress. This was the example set by the Makabayan bloc when they portioned parts of the Bayan Muna partylist to create additional satellite PL groups. However, this is a very instrumentalist and cynical way of approaching the partylist election. Instead of instituting needed reforms in the partylist system, they are merely fiddling with the PL system’s increasing *trapo* terrain.

Campaign to reform the PL Law

However, the partylist system remains a legitimate electoral arena. We cannot afford to engage in another partylist election where the rules of the game are unjust. It is crucial for different groups to organize a grassroots campaign to reform the partylist law similar to the successful campaigns mounted for the passage of agrarian reforms and reproductive health laws. This grassroots campaign must aim to compel Congress to amend the Partylist Law, create a strong partylist constituency and help educate the public regarding the importance of the partylist system.

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Electoral reforms as an immediate priority

In conclusion, the recently concluded midterm election -- notwithstanding the heavy *dent* made by *trapos* and political dynasties -- was a fairly peaceful electoral arena where the left participated to accrue power in the different levels of government. However, the weakness of the left and its collective failure to democratize the electoral terrain prevented it from fully benefitting from its inherent potentials. With the probable exception of Akbayan and Makabayan, as well as a few reform-oriented partylist groups,¹³ the broad progressive community's electoral performance was dismal. Unless the left, more so the democratic left bloc, rethinks its electoral strategy, build power bases in the local arena, and imagine a new and broad electoral project, it will find it extremely difficult to radically improve its position in the electoral landscape.

The immediate challenge is to democratize the electoral system. It's high time that the democratic left and other progressives once again seriously embark on a campaign to reform our electoral system, similar to what was mounted 20 years ago when we lobbied for the passage of the Partylist Law. Electoral reforms must be seen as a main concern and issue that must be addressed and won together with other equally important issues in the next three years. The democratic left must start the process by sitting once again as a community, and collectively look at both the real limits of electoral reform and what it could really accomplish in the coming years.

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¹ Deputy Secretary General of Akbayan Party, a democratic left political party in the Philippines.

² Frederick Engels, "Introduction to Karl Marx's *The Class Struggles in France*," *Collected Works*

³ Politicians who dispense political or material favor to foment elitist rule through political dependence and patronage.

⁴ A form of elite rule where a single or few political families/clans control political power.

⁵ A term used to describe the alliance between former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and then presidential candidate Manuel Villar. Villar was widely seen as the proxy candidate of Arroyo.

⁶ The partylist system in the Philippines reserves 57 seats in the House of Representatives or 20% for partylist/sectoral representation. It requires participating parties to garner at least 2% of the national vote to be given one seat, with additional seats determined by a formula depending on the number of votes garnered. The system allows for a maximum of three seats per a partylist group. If the number of partylist representatives does not reach 20% of the total number of members in the House of Representatives, groups that haven't won seats but near the 2% benchmark are given a seat each until the 57 seats are filled up. The Filipino voter has two votes in the legislative elections -- for district representative and for the party-list representative.

⁷ The section of the Philippine left that prescribes a Maoist-inspired "national democratic revolution" to solve society's social ills.

⁸ Democratic left is a term used by left forces in the Philippines which have shunned the idea that armed struggle is the only path towards social change. Some of those who consider themselves democratic left adopted the free and open participation in the elections and other forms of democratic engagement to effect political change. The democratic left could also mean anti-Stalinism or anti-leftist authoritarianism.

⁹ Hontiveros twice failed to win a senate seat despite being in coalition with Aquino since 2010.

¹⁰ According to an initial assessment by Akbayan Secretary General Conrad Castillo, Akbayan was able to win more or less 100 LGU seats with a vice-gubernatorial seat as the highest position.

¹¹ In 2001, a series of popular demonstrations dubbed as "People Power 2" toppled President Joseph Estrada. Series of popular and massive demonstrations were also mounted to oust Arroyo due to allegations of election cheating in 2004. However, this was quelled by the extra-judicial killing of many political dissidents and strong state-arm tactics to break up demonstrations. Participatory Democracy, Participatory Socialism: The Akbayan Narrative <https://akbayan.org.ph/who-we-are/9-participatory-democracy-participatory-socialism-the-akbayan-narrative>

¹² AMIN and Ang Nars

