

Malaysia on the cusp of becoming a 'normal democracy'

A fragmented party system, struggles with voter turnout, uncertainty over the electoral outcome, and protracted negotiations over who gets to form the government – these are common features in democracies in many parts of the world.

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Malaysia's Parliament was dissolved on Oct 10. Elections must now be held within the next 60 days of that date. Much has changed in the country since the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH) defeated the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) just over four years ago.

Malaysia has seen three prime ministers since then – Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and the current Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob. Automatic voter registration and a lowering of the voting age to 18 years old will also result in about 5.8 million new voters. This is more than a quarter of the total electorate standing at about 21 million voters.

More recently, Malaysia is also struggling with rising inflation as well as a depreciating ringgit.

Given the numerous developments, what are some things we can expect from the upcoming elections?

FRAGMENTED PARTY SYSTEM

One of the most important developments that will have significant impact on the elections is further fragmentation of the Malaysian party system.

Recall that in the May 2018 general elections, there were three electoral coalitions of unequal strengths. The dominant BN government competed against a powerful PH opposition alliance, and the somewhat marginalised Gagasan Sejahtera. The Gagasan Sejahtera was a small, informal alliance fronted by PAS, the conservative Malaysian Islamic Party.

This time around, we can expect up to four electoral coalitions competing against each other. The incumbent BN will once again compete against PH, alongside the PAS-affiliated Perikatan Nasional, and Dr Mahathir's Gerakan Tanah Air.

These four electoral coalitions do not yet include the newly established youth party Muda, the perennial outsider Socialist Party of Malaysia, a fledgling party called Parti Bangsa Malaysia headed by the Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister, Datuk Zuraida Kamaruddin, as well as the ever-evolving parties from Sabah and Sarawak.

It remains to be seen whether these smaller parties will join one of the electoral coalitions and campaign together, or simply coordinate with the coalitions to avoid competing in the same constituencies. We will have to watch closely how the numerous parties and coalitions position their candidates come nomination day.

Whatever the configuration, this fragmented political landscape and the nature of its players will yield several consequences.

LOW VOTER TURNOUT

First, we can expect a low voter turnout due to the simultaneously compelling and unsavoury choices presented to Malaysian voters.

The ruling Barisan Nasional, headed by the Umno, is still viewed by many Malaysians as the only credible governing force that will

preserve the rights and privileges of Malays. At the same time, however, many Malaysians also know that voting for the coalition means an unsatisfactory continuation of race-based patronage politics.

Similarly, even though the Pakatan Harapan opposition coalition represents the best hope for reforming politics, disappointed Malaysian voters have not forgotten its dismal record during its 22 months in government. They doubt that it will be capable of implementing its reform agenda if given a second chance.

For the Perikatan Nasional, its brand of conservative Islamic politics is both an attraction and aversion for different sets of voters. It is unclear whether the coalition can garner enough support beyond a small, but not insignificant, slice of the electorate.

Lastly, the novelty of Gerakan Tanah Air for some voters is offset by significant uncertainty over the size of its support among fellow citizens, the quality of its candidates, and its governing capabilities.

Faced with no good options, it is

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no wonder that many Malaysians might choose to stay home rather than turn out to choose their next government. Heavy rains and floods during the monsoon season are also likely to depress overall voter turnout.

GREAT UNCERTAINTY OVER RESULTS

Second, a fragmented party system also entails substantial uncertainty over the electoral outcome.

In the not so distant past, Malaysian elections were fairly easy to predict. One could count on the Barisan Nasional returning to power on the next day of the elections, with the only uncertainty being the number of seats lost or gained by the opposition.

This time around, multiple three- or four-cornered contests across Malaysia's numerous constituencies will mean that the electoral outcome will be much harder to predict, even with good public opinion survey data.

Most public opinion surveys in Malaysia generate aggregate results at the national or state level. One cannot reliably make accurate inferences from such aggregate data when there are multi-cornered contests in each electoral constituency.

Moreover, the persuasiveness of the campaign messages of each electoral coalition and the characteristics of the candidates in each constituency will also subtly shift the turnout dynamics across constituencies. Analysts cannot make simple assumptions about the average national turnout rate to generate predictions for each electoral constituency.

Respondent fatigue from the avalanche of public opinion surveys in a shortened campaign period may continue to be a problem, just like before the 2018 elections. Even if respondents do not self-censor, they may also falsify their preferences to avoid perceived embarrassment.

Overall, we need to be more circumspect about our abilities to predict the electoral outcome from public opinion survey results.

PROTRACTED NEGOTIATIONS

Given these conditions, it may well be the case that no single competing electoral coalition will win an outright majority in the legislature when the election concludes.

This will mean protracted negotiations after the elections as rival parties and coalitions scramble to form a winning majority.

Which group of parties will succeed is hard to predict.

Some analysts suggest that compatibilities in ideology will

play a significant role in binding different parties together. But one can never discount how readily certain politicians will bend ideology in pursuit of power.

Furthermore, parties in Sabah and Sarawak are likely to play a pivotal, outsized role in negotiations as different coalitions try to win them over.

We can expect Sabah and Sarawak parties to try to extract substantial concessions from their counterparts in Peninsular Malaysia. These concessions may include important Cabinet positions, a greater share of petroleum revenues, reforms to expand the number of Sabah and Sarawak constituencies in the Malaysian legislature, or further autonomy in the internal management of their states.

Regardless, this may be the first time in Malaysia's electoral history when post-electoral manoeuvring is more important than pre-electoral campaigning. We should pay close attention to the deals that are forged for the challenges they portend for the next government.

A NORMAL DEMOCRACY

One may be inclined to feel unsettled by the party fragmentation and electoral uncertainty. What was once a highly predictable political system has transformed into a seemingly chaotic one.

But perhaps it's time to shift to a different paradigm when evaluating Malaysia's politics.

What we see developing in Malaysia – a fragmented party system, low voter turnout, uncertainty over electoral outcomes, and protracted post-electoral negotiations – are not unlike what is found in democracies in many other parts of the world. In many European countries, it's spar for the course.

In short, political fluidity and uncertainty are normal for democracies.

Indeed, the famed political scientist Adam Przeworski once proposed a minimal definition of democracy as "institutionalised uncertainty". This means that political parties do their best to compete in an institutionalised electoral system, but no one can predict the final electoral outcome. Once the dust has settled and the ballots counted, political parties are expected to accept the outcome peacefully, whatever it may be.

By these standards, Malaysia is just on the cusp of becoming a normal democracy, just like many others around the world.

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