

**PROSIDING**

*Seminar*  
**POLITIK MALAYSIA**

**Penyunting**

Worran Hj. Kabul  
Shireen Haron  
Mat Zin Mat Kib  
Abdul Kadir Rosline

# **ROLES OF MONEY, MEDIA AND POLITICAL MACHINERY RECONSIDERED: THE MALAYSIAN 12<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ELECTION 2008**

*Nursuria Mahrif  
Sharon Pearl Henry Serub*

## **ABSTRACT**

*Among the important requisites for democracy is the freedom of the media as well as freedom to form and organize political parties. And to make possible the workings of democracy is having regular election, meaning political parties must be allowed to campaign, and hence enabling them to present their manifesto to the electorates to vote for those who they wish to govern over them. For this process to run smoothly, money is an essential element; a tool for the running of the election process itself as well as to enable the various political parties to organize their campaign. Thus in any election, these three elements of money, media and political machinery must come into play to enable the selection and later, formation of the government to be done. This paper will discuss the roles of these three elements in the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election 2008.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election that was held on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2008 turned out to be a watershed for this young country of 50 years old (Malaysia became 51 years old on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2008). For the second time in its history, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition party failed to get the two-third majority it aimed for in the election. The first time was in 1969. According to the Federal Constitution, a simple majority is sufficient for the winning party to form a government but BN targeted the two third figures to allow them to easily amend the constitution. This was harped into the peoples' mindset so much that many actually believed that the two third majorities is needed to form a government!

This paper will try to explain how the elements of money, media and political machinery come into play during election campaign and how, this time around, what changes in these three elements that resulted in a political tsunami that changes the Malaysian political landscape.

## **MONEY**

What is money? It is a medium of exchange. What does it do? It ensures the success of exchange by being the one item on offer that is always acceptable. Why is it necessary? Because human beings must exchange to live together in peace, and to prosper. Human beings have lived together for more

than two million years. Money in its modern form - coin of fixed weight and denomination - came into use less than three thousand years ago. It took a long time to discover the physical good which best serves the purpose of a medium of exchange.

Money is also considered as an important element to ensure a political success. Money is used in the entire aspects of governance – the administration of the country, the development projects, payment of salaries etc. But, one must not forget to include that money is also very beneficial to run a political campaign by each political party.

For the case of Malaysia, how to spend for election and what is and not considered as election expenses are well-said in the Malaysia's Election Act 1958 and Election Offences Act 1954. Still, before looking into detail the influence of money, it is essential to look in brief on the outlook of the previous 2008 Malaysia's General Election.

The General Election held on March 8 2008 marked an unprecedented setback for the ruling National Front (BN) coalition. In 2004, the 14-party BN won 90% of parliamentary seats- 298 to the combined opposition's 21 – and control of all states except Kelantan. (Weiss: 2008) This time, its support slipping among all ethnic communities, the BN lost its majority in five of 12 state legislatures under contest, while its share of seats in the federal government declined from 91% to 63%. Anything less than a 2/3 majority in parliament is considered as debacle, not least since it complicates amending the constitutions, as has been done over 40 times since 1957. Never before have so many state legislature switched hands. Even PM Abdullah Ahmad Badawi conceded from the outset that he did not expect a reprise of the BN's previous strong showing, the extent of the opposition's advance was expected even by the parties themselves.

Although the long term implications of the results are unclear, at least on the federal level, the opposition – chiefly the National Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) – will now have a chance to put its ideas into practice, from forging a workable coalition to cleaning up state politics. Perhaps, more importantly, these results suggest the possibility of a less communal political order. (Meredith L. Weiss: 2008).

### **How Much is Actually Needed to Contest In an Election?**

In fact, for starters, candidates have to deposit RM10000 for a parliamentary seat and RM5000 for a state seat to the Returning Officer before or during nomination day. A candidate loses the deposit if he/she fails to secure 1/8 or 12.5% of the total number of votes polled by all the candidates in a constituency.

This is just the deposit though. Candidates put up buntings, banners, posters and other materials during the campaign period. They have to clean up the mess after polling day. To make sure they do, candidates have to pay a deposit of RM5000 for parliamentary elections and RM3000 for state elections. This deposit will be returned if the candidates remove all the materials put up in public places within 14 days after the election.

There are other incurring costs in running a campaign, such as logistics, materials etc. The report of election expenses has to be forwarded to the State Election Officer within 31 days after the

election results are published in the Gazette. Failure to submit the return within the prescribed time would be deemed an illegal practice under the Election Offences Act 1954. The person convicted of this offence can face a fine of RM5000 and lose the seat. He / She can also be qualified from contesting for 5 years.

## **MEDIA**

Among the requisites of political campaign is the element of political communication. This means putting out political messages to the public or perspective voters on the party's manifesto. As with any communication process, this involved communication channel and in political campaign it involves the media. According to Ranney (1996: 136) communications media consist of firstly, interpersonal media which are *media that transmit their messages by direct personal contact between communicators and receivers and include personal conversations, personal letters, and the like*. Secondly the mass media that are *media that 'broadcast' messages to large numbers of receivers with whom they have no face-to-face contact*. These includes the television, radio, newspapers, movies, magazines, and books. However to this we may add another category that is the alternative media that comprises of the internet (blogs, political websites, online news, YouTube, etc) as well as the short-messaging-services (SMS) or text messages.

### **Campaign and the Interpersonal Media**

In the context of Malaysian elections, this means door to door campaigning (also known as canvassing) as well as holding large public rally. This is meant to allow all contesting parties and candidates opportunities to present their programs or manifesto to the electorates and persuade them to vote for their parties. Due to the traditionally short campaign period in Malaysia (the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election campaign period was considered to be quite long if compared to previous elections), this is a time saving methods for all candidates and their parties concern. Police permit need to be obtained before holding these rallies and this often became a hindrance for candidates, especially those from the opposition parties. Door to door campaign is not considered effective as logically it is impossible for a candidate to visit all the households in his or her constituency.

### **Campaign and the Mass Media**

The mass media itself remains the only viable option to reach the wide mainstream viewers which include the larger percentage of electorates. The medium itself is not cheap and depending on the type of communication channel or type of mass media chosen, it can run into thousands of Ringgit. Thus this will depend on the financial capability of the political parties and candidates.

Furthermore the mass media are placed under state (government) control and the degree of control will be determined by the type of government the state have. Controls are done through operating license for the television stations, for instance, where renewal of the license are done based on the discretion of the ministry concern. In Malaysia, the mainstream media are fully utilized by the ruling party to carry out their campaign.

Furthermore, most of the private television as well as printed media are connected and partly owned by the ruling party or member of the ruling party. Therefore, promoting their manifesto

through the mainstream media is not a problem as they control the granting and renewal of licenses for the mass media through the government ministry and by owning shares in the private television as well as the printed media. These result in limited opportunities for the non-ruling party to promote their programs and they are 'forced' to reach out to the electorates through other means that is the alternative media.

### **Campaign and the Alternative Media**

As mentioned earlier, alternative media refers to the internet where online news, interactive forums as well as individual blogs are used to disperse information and messages to the masses. These individuals in the cyber world are known as 'netizens' and based on their vigorous activity in campaigning during the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election, we can deduced that this communication channel are made used to get around the limitations put in place by the authority concerned. In this cyber world individuals as well as political parties relished in the freedom in expressing their concern and opinion to the public; regular announcements regarding party's activities are made on party website. However there are limitations to this form of media as not all the electorates have access to the internet. Those in the rural areas do not enjoy telephone services, let alone internet coverage. Thus, this form of communication channel only succeeded in the internet connected urban areas.

Furthermore most netizens are made up of young, technologically savvy individuals who are easily aroused by emotional issues and when it comes to the cyber world, the information available may or may not be entirely authentic. Therefore the young electorate may be swayed towards certain emotional messages rather than questioning the authenticity of such information.

### **POLITICAL MACHINERY**

Political machinery refers to the how the political parties maneuver their members to canvass for support during the election campaign. Depending on the size of the political parties, the methods may vary. For example, UMNO divided itself into several sections, for instance, UMNO, Wanita UMNO, Pemuda UMNO and Puteri UMNO. For the past elections, Puteri UMNO for example launched several programs to attract voters to support the party during election by introducing 'Program Anak Angkat' whereby each family in an area will take in a member of Puteri UMNO for several days. The member will stay with the family as their 'anak angkat' (foster child) and during their stay will inform the family on the manifesto of the party as well as ensuring that the voters in that family will vote for UMNO on polling day. They went so far as to escort the family members to the polling station. To ensure that the members are not a burden for the foster family, each family will received allowance for having the 'anak angkat' to stay with them.

Even the government machinery is not spared during the campaign period. In a study done on the electoral system, it was noted that government resources, funds and personnel are commonly utilized to assist political party's candidates and workers to campaign (Puthuchearry et al 2003: 46). These supports are not available to the opposition parties.

### **3Ms in the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election**

#### **The 12<sup>th</sup> general election expenses**

The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition has spent RM1 million in print media advertising in the first three days of the election campaign. This is supported by an article written by Tan Sri (Dr) Ramon V. Navaratnam, President, Transparency International – Malaysia, dated March 7, 2008. In his article, Tan Sri Ramon concluded that in the first twelve days of the period under monitor i.e. Feb 25-March 07, Barisan Nasional (BN) was projected to have spent a cumulative total of RM7.285million.

This is based on Transparency International – Malaysia's political parties' print media advertisement expenditures project which monitors 18 newspapers every day.

According to the Election Offences Act 1954, a parliamentary candidate can spend only up to RM 200,000 while a state candidate, only RM 100,000 in total election campaign expenditure. This means BN's 222 parliamentary candidates and 504 state candidates had spent collectively a total of RM 94.8 million. Of this 94.8 million, 7.68% had been spent on print media advertisements thus far, after nomination date.

The 97 parliamentary candidates and 174 state candidates from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) were collectively allowed to spend up to RM 36.8million. There were some advertisements by PKR that collectively added up to RM25,000 or 0.07% of the total projected allowable election expenditure for their candidates.

With 47 parliamentary candidates and 101 state candidates, Democratic Action Party (DAP) spent up to RM 19.5 million but the few advertisements that were recorded added up to total costs of RM111,000 or 0.57% of the total projected allowable election expenditure for their candidates.

None of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS)'s 66 parliamentary candidates and 235 state candidates had so far, spent anything on print media advertisement although their candidates total projected allowable election expenditure adds up to RM 36.7 million.

#### **Rise of the alternative media?**

An online monitoring body, the Malaysian Media Monitors (a joint project consisting of several NGOs set up to monitor mainstream media's coverage of the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election campaign) states that there still exist an imbalance of coverage given to the opposition political parties during the campaign period. And even when there is coverage for the opposition parties, the mainstream media would choose to focus on the negative aspects. This is not surprising as the mainstream media in the country are owned and controlled by the ruling party.

Faced with the situation of limited (even non-existence) airtime on the mainstream media, the opposition parties opt to reach out to the voters through the internet. In the 2004 General Election, the use of alternative media was not as active compared to the 2008 campaign. Back then, the Internet is used mainly for email and chatting (Wong, 2004). Today however, with a new generation that is more IT savvy, where logging on the 'net' is as common as brushing their teeth in the morning, the internet have become a powerful tool for the parties who are creative enough to use it. Online

news such as *MalaysiaKini* and *malaysia.msn.com* quickly become staple for this group. But access to these news are only limited to those who have internet access and this exclude voters in the rural areas.

Based on the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election results, we can conclude that the reason why the opposition party candidates are able to win seats in urban areas (Kuala Lumpur, Perak, Selangor and Penang) whereas the rural voters who are left in the internet backwater still opt for BN parties (especially Sabah and Sarawak).

### **Political machinery: Size or strategy?**

As with the previous elections, the BN political machinery goes all out to win support from the voters using whatever means possible. Unfortunately due partly to the internal bickering in the main component parties of BN regarding leadership and successors, the public ended up giving more attention to these issues rather than the BN manifesto. The result is the BN 'Blue Wave' was not as effective compared to the 2004 General Election. Furthermore, this time around the opposition managed to get their act together, no thanks to the cunning strategist, Anwar Ibrahim who became moderator between DAP and PAS. PKR became the biggest winner among the opposition coalition. Thus in this case, the giant size of BN machinery was not as effective as the leaders seem to underestimate the strategy of the opposition coalition. Even the Pakatan Rakyat seems genuinely surprised with the number of seats that they managed to wrest from the BN.

### **Malaysia's 2008 election roundup**

The results of the 2008 General Election has created a new dimension in Malaysian politics. New issues and ideologies have come into play into the dynamics of the political system. For the first time in Malaysian political history, there is a strong and viable opposition to the once powerful Barisan Nasional coalition. The public because of the information revolution have made a significant shift in their mindset. Multiracial politics has become an important force as opposed to the race-based politics which was practiced by the Barisan Nasional coalition. The outcome of the General Election will also mean that there can be more open debate on race, religion and policies like the NEP.

With regards to the election expenses, Transparency-International Malaysia (TI-M) calls for changes in election laws in respect of election finance and caretaker government to promote transparency and a level playing field, which are essential to free and fair elections. Based on the argument by TI-M (as admitted by EC Secretary Dato Kamaruzaman himself), the Election Offences Act 1958 governs only expenses by candidates but not by the parties. This loophole has allowed parties to spend massively beyond the caps of RM 200,000 (parliamentary) and RM 100,000 (state) contest without getting caught. TI-M suggests that the Act be amended so that not only candidates' finances but the parties' election finances are subject to the caps. In this election, by right, no parties should spend more than RM 94.9 million as they may; at most, contest only 222 parliamentary seats and 505 state seats. However, some parties' advertising expenses alone may exceed this figure. Knowing the loophole, the EC should propose a change to the law or remove all caps subject to strict reporting requirements. (TI-M: *February 22, 2008*).

The future of Malaysian politics will be shaped by political forces that understand the roots and causes of the outcome of this General Election. Not only the possible factors / reasons for the defeat

of the incumbent party BN, but in terms of election expenses, the government of Malaysia should also consider as its priority as well.

## REFERENCES

- Ranney, Austin, (1996) *Governing: An Introduction to Political Science (7<sup>th</sup> ed.)*, Singapore: Prentice Hall.
- Election Act 1958
- Election Offences Act 1954
- Filip Palda. (March 2002). *Campaign Finances: An Introductory Essay Available on line at <http://129.3.20.41/eps/pe/papers/0209/0209005.pdf>*
- Jacobson, Gary C. *Measuring Campaign Spending Effects In US House Elections*. Available on line at <http://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472099213-ch8.pdf>
- “Update projections of print media advertisement expenditure by political parties March 7, 2008” by Tan Sri (Dr) Ramon V. Navaratnam President, Transparency International Malaysia. Available online at [http://www.transparency.org.my/press/press\\_7Mar08.htm](http://www.transparency.org.my/press/press_7Mar08.htm)
- Election Laws Need Reform for Transparency and a Level Playing Field (February 22, 2008) by Transparency International Malaysia*. Available online at [http://www.transparency.org.my/press/press\\_22Feb08.htm](http://www.transparency.org.my/press/press_22Feb08.htm)
- An Analysis of Malaysia's 12<sup>th</sup> General Election from <http://www.asli.com.my>*. Retrieved on (September 26, 2008)
- Meredith L. Weiss (2008). *Malaysia's 12<sup>th</sup> General Election: Causes and Consequences of the Opposition's Surge*, Asia Pacific Bulletin, Number 12, March 17, 2008
- Norris, Pippa. (2004). *The Evolution of Election Campaigns: Eroding Political Engagement*. Paper submitted for the conference on *Political Communications in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, St. Margaret's College, University of Otago, New Zealand, January 2004. Available on line <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris/Acrobat/Otago%20The%20Evolution%20of%20Election%20Campaigns.pdf>
- Stratmann, Thomas. (2005). *The Effectiveness of Money in Ballot Measure Campaigns*. *Symposium on the Impact of Direct Democracy*. Available online at <http://www.gmu.edu/jbc/stratmann/effectmoney.pdf>
- Puthucheary, Mavis and Norani Othman (2003), *The Electoral System of Malaysia: A Report*, UKM: IKMAS. Welsh, Bridget, *Malaysia's Democratic Opening*, retrieved on (23<sup>rd</sup> September 2008) from [http://www.worldbulletin.net/author\\_article\\_print.php?id=1609](http://www.worldbulletin.net/author_article_print.php?id=1609)
- Tommy Thomas (2008), *Election 2008: Crossing The Rubicon*, *Aliran Monthly 2008:2*, retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2008 from <http://www.aliran.com/index.php?view=article&catid=64%3A2008-2&id=553%3Ael>
- Election 1008-Malaysian Media Monitors' Diary (29 March 2008)*, retrieved 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2008 from <http://www.aliran.com/elections/>



Wong Kok Keong, *RTM And TV3 Were The Main Culprits*, *Aliran Monthly* (2004):5, retrieved on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2008 from <http://www.aliran.com/oldsite/monthly/2004a/5i.html>

*Parliament Dissolved Today For 12<sup>th</sup> General Election (13 February 2008)*, *Bernama*, retrieved from [http://www3.pmo.gov.my/?menu=newslist&news\\_id=204&news\\_cat=13&page=1731](http://www3.pmo.gov.my/?menu=newslist&news_id=204&news_cat=13&page=1731)