

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Elections in Malaysia;
Of Victory and Defeat

Hotel Merlin
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

It was a landslide! A full-scale rout! From the time the first returns began to trickle into the Department of Information until the last two straggling constituencies collected the votes from far up-river polling stations, the victory fever mounted. The final victory was beyond the fondest dreams of the victors and the greatest fears of the losers. As constituency after constituency sent in its returns, Tungku Abdul Rahman's Alliance Party piled up greater gains than anyone expected. The Tungku's own highest prediction was for 80 of the 104 federal parliamentary seats in Malaysia's original 11 states. (And many argue that the Tungku actually raised his own rational prediction by a hopeful 20 seats.) In the final count, the Alliance won 89 seats in the federal parliament, and 241 of the combined 282 seats in the individual state assemblies. Compared with the 1959 elections, there were solid gains everywhere.

In 1959 the Alliance won 74 seats with 51% of the total vote. Yesterday it won 89 seats with about 55% of the vote. It increased its proportion of the total vote in every state. It increased the number of seats from every state except those where it had already won all the seats in 1959. In six states it won all the federal seats. It cut deeply into the right wing and left wing opposition parties. The Alliance sailing boat, the party symbol, has left a wide and deep wake in Malayan politics. Tonight Kuala Lumpur is both wild with jubilation and dark with sinister forebodings. What did the elections show and what will they mean for the future?

Let me turn first to some of the details of the results. If you are uninterested (as most people would be) in the details of electoral politics in Malaya, just skip the next 8 paragraphs.

In the first place the election returned the mandate to the Alliance Party. No one ever really doubted that the Alliance would get the mandate. It has been the ruling party since 1955 and this means a great deal in a country where government has a near monopoly on the dissemination of information and has the legal machinery to put into detention anyone whose activities are - in the opinion of the government - prejudicial to the security of the nation. One leader of the Socialist Front and two leaders of the religious Pan Malayan Islamic Party contested the elections while under detention. The Socialist lost, but the two religious leaders won (it is not known just how they will carry out their duties as legislators). The activities of the wide-reaching Department

of Information, together with the radio and television services, has been working at high key for six months to explain to the people how this government has benefitted them. Thus there was never any reason to fear that the Alliance would not receive the mandate. But such are the vagaries of the electoral process, such is the unknown quantity (especially where no public opinion polling is done), that the government did hold its breath while the people went individually to the private polling booths to make their marks. The sigh of relief from government and its many agencies was audible throughout Kuala Lumpur today.

In the process of winning a substantial victory, the Alliance laid waste its opponents. On the right was the Pan Malayan Islamic Party with its strongholds in Kelantan, where it controls (still) the state government, and Trengganu, where it controlled the state government from 1959 to 1961. In Trengganu the Alliance won only one seat in 1959; yesterday it won 5 of the 6 seats, and only lost the sixth by the narrow margin of 136 votes out of a total of 22,834. In 1959 the Alliance won only 37% of the total vote. Yesterday it won 53%, giving it handsome margins in all of its constituencies. Of Kelantan's 10 seats, the Alliance won only 2; it had won 1 in 1959. In 1959 it won only 31% of the vote, yesterday it won 41%. In all of the 8 constituencies where it lost, it greatly increased its vote. In 1959 it consistently lost by margins of 6,000 to 10,000 votes in constituencies of around 25,000. Yesterday it was losing to the PMIP by margins of 1,000 or 2,000 votes. The story was the same in other states where the PMIP fielded unsuccessful candidates. The Alliance victory margins were greater this year than in 1959.

So it went with the myriad parties of the left as well. On the near left, Ipoh's Peoples' Progressive Party lost two of the four seats it captured in 1959; and its victory margins were greatly slashed even in its two highly urbanized constituencies. The Seremban Independents of 1959 - who bolted the party over the issues of Chinese seats and Chinese education - lost by failing to contest this election. The United Democratic Party emerged since the last elections and made an attempt to capture leadership of the Chinese. It did well in the local council elections in 1961 and 1963, but only 1 of its 27 candidates for the federal parliament won in yesterday's elections.

Farther on the left are the parties of the Socialist Front. This is now a misnomer, for the Malay wing, Party Rakyat, has been moribund for some time. The "Front" is really little more than the Chinese Labor Party. In 1959 the Front won 6 federal seats. Yesterday the Alliance won back 4 of those; three in Selangor and one in Penang. Even where it won, the Front had its victory margins paired, even to below 50% of the total vote.

All of the cabinet ministers won by substantial margins. The Prime Minister and his deputy captured 70 to 90% of the total vote in constituencies of about 20,000.

The Socialist's Indonesian-Malay, Boesteman, won 25% of the vote, despite being under detention.

Aziz bin Ishak, ex-Minister of Agriculture who left the party in late 1962, ran on the Socialist ticket and lost, polling only 35% of the vote.

Probably one of the biggest surprises was the very poor showing of Singapore's Peoples' Action Party. It fielded 11 candidates in an obvious attempt to displace the MCA in the alliance with the Malays. It was widely expected that it would provide an image of strong Chinese leadership and would cut into the MCA following. In the polling booths, however, it managed to win only one seat. It was solidly beaten by both the MCA and the Socialist Front.

It seems to me that the victory was the result of three combined forces: a development program, good party organization, and an external military threat.

Malaysia has had one of the region's most high-powered development programs for the past four years. Local bodies have been drawn into planning and implementation. Emphasis has been placed on communication. New roads penetrate to the most remote rural areas. New land is opened; schools are built. Information services blanket the country with film shows about development programs. An adult education program has touched well over a quarter of a million rural adults, bringing instruction in reading, writing and good citizenship. This has had a most obvious effect against the PMIP, whose narrow religious orthodoxy feeds on the physical and intellectual isolation of the rural Malays. In a more general way development has demonstrated that there is an active government, and that it can actually respond to personal requests for more mosques as well as for more schools. In its wake, development has brought at least apparent prosperity. Alliance leaders can argue, as many another successful politician, that, "you never had it so good."

The second source of victory lies in good party organization. The MCA has been considerably revitalized and has launched a successful program to register more Chinese voters. It has also extended its local party organization to match the structure the Malay wing has had from the beginning of modern politics. From the operations room in Kuala Lumpur to the branch organizations, the old Emergency and Rural Development structure has been used to mobilize leaders and voters. It has worked both for the Chinese and the Malay wings. Of the 15 seats won from opposition parties, the Malay wing won 7 and the Chinese wing won 8.

By far the most dramatic force in the elections, however, was Konfrontasi, Indonesia's avowed attempt to crush Malaysia. If the armed incursions in Sabah and Sarawak were not a sufficient threat, there have been more recent incidents closer to home. Singapore has experienced a wave of bombings that has been tied in the public mind (probably rightly) to Indonesian infiltrators. The Socialist Boesteman was jailed for his alleged dealings with the Indonesians. As the election drew nearer news of mysterious planes, parachutes, frogmen and boxes of ammunition with Indonesian insignia left on the beaches have added to the sense of danger. There is much speculation that some of the incidents have been trumped up to dramatize the Indonesian threat, and Alliance leaders have certainly not tried to play down the danger. Quite the contrary! Konfrontasi has provided them with the best possible rallying call for the population. "Support the government in this time

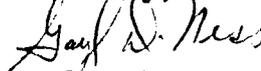
of danger - Unite behind the Tungku!"

With this rallying call the Alliance has had to promise nothing more than the protection of national integrity. Thanks to British and US military might, this is a promise the government will most likely be able to deliver if the chips are ever down. In addition, this threat has given the Alliance an effective club for beating the opposition. Neither the PMIP nor the Socialist Front have come out with firm anti-Indonesia stands. Religious and racial ties have always held the PMIP close to Indonesia. In the case of the Socialist, I think it is plain ideological cussedness that keeps them from jumping on the bandwagon, though staying off meant political suicide. They simply refuse to get mixed up in this nationalist-bourgeois conflict. They blame the Alliance for bringing on Konfrontasi and promise to bring peace if given power. This only allows the Alliance to claim - as it does widely and loudly - that the danger lies within as well as without.

Both the proportions of this victory and the dramatic role played by Konfrontasi spell considerable danger for the future. From this election one should learn the political value of public investment and good party organization as well as of an external threat. I fear that only the last lesson will be well learned. It fits too well with both the dramatic facts of the election and with the self-indulgent, pleasure-loving character of the government. Any governing party seriously concerned with the threat of an orthodox religious opposition would never have scheduled elections, as this one did, two days after a major religious holiday and the day after regular prayer day. The elections were scheduled for Saturday apparently to provide a clear weekend for celebrations! In one sense this is delightful. It may be better not to be too serious about life, because it can easily be unbalanced by the intervention of presumptuous human hands. But if this leads as well to a reluctance to understand that winning elections (free elections) means lots of hard work, and that there is an easier way through keeping alive external threats, then the pleasure-loving character becomes anything but delightful.

On the night before elections Radio Malaysia broadcast instructions to the voters. It argued that voting is a great privilege, because it allows people to tell the government what it wants done. But one must vote well and wisely or one could lose the privilege and never be able to vote again! The institutions of liberal democracy in Malaysia are young and growing, but they are precarious in the extreme. The effects of Konfrontasi on these elections may well have been to provide a great victory in the short run at the price of seriously weakening the institutions of democracy in the long run.

Sincerely,


Gayl D. Ness

1. The Alliance is made up of the United Malays National Organization, the Malayan Chinese Association and the Malayan Indian Congress.
2. The original 11 states of the Federation of Malaya became the Federation of Malaysia in late 1963 with the addition of Singapore and the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah.