

Opposition gets to business as new premier sworn in

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The Malaysian opposition, led by former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim -- who has made a stunning political comeback after his sacking and jailing a decade ago -- was getting down to business yesterday as the prime minister Abdullah Badawi was sworn in for a second term.

After stunning electoral gains that took them completely by surprise, Malaysia's opposition now faces the daunting task of running five states and a third of the national parliament.

The trio of diverse parties, which had formed a loose alliance to confront the Barisan Nasional coalition, had never dreamed of bagging such rich prizes, including the two wealthiest states Selangor and Penang -- home to high-brand foreign companies such as Sony and Intel.

Now the Keadilan party of opposition figurehead Anwar Ibrahim, as well as the Islamic party PAS and the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), must form workable coalitions to govern.

"We expected to make gains in the polls but not to this extent," admitted PAS policy-maker Hatta Ramli, who said the party led by Islamic scholars would work with its new partners to deliver fair and efficient government.

"We have agreed to resolve

issues via consensus. We will not go for each other's necks," he said.

PAS has already moved to dispel fears it could exert its ideology over the newly acquired states, saying it would respect minority rights and that there would not be any dramatic changes for non-Muslims.

The three parties will rule the four swing states -- Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor -- in various coalitions. PAS also extended its hold in northern Kelantan state, which it had ruled by a thin majority.

Penang, styled as Malaysia's "Silicon Valley", is home to electronic giants from the United States, Germany and Japan including Intel, Motorola, Dell and Sony. Selangor, which surrounds Kuala Lumpur, is Malaysia's most industrialised state with thousands of manufacturing and service-related companies.

Perak and Kedah mainly rely on forestry and agricultural trade.

State media said PAS would appoint chief ministers in Kedah and Perak. The DAP will preside in Penang and a Keadilan chief minister will run Selangor.

Tricia Yeoh, director of the Centre for Public Policy Studies, said the opposition must ensure their pre-election alliance remains intact.

Anwar said late Sunday that the opposition parties would be able to put aside their ideological differ-

ences and govern effectively.

He said they would "focus on the economic issue and trying to resolve some of the problems affecting the masses, particularly in the issue of poverty and the normal needs of an average citizen."

Anwar is banned from holding public office until April due to a corruption conviction, and he said his plans to enter parliament in a by-election are on hold until he consolidates his party's gains.

Observers said Malaysia's fractured, race-based political scene has been shattered by the electoral outcome, and looked set to be replaced by a modern two-party system.

Badawi however is upbeat despite the rebuke handed to the coalition which has ruled for half a century, and downplayed the loss of the two-thirds majority which had allowed it to amend the constitution at will.

"It will not hamper us from carrying out government policies. We have a strong majority," he said, adding that "the security situation in the country is peaceful and there is no sign of any chaos."

But Badawi conceded that UMNO, which represents majority Muslim Malays, needed to consider reforms.

"UMNO has accepted what happened was a lesson to us," he said. "We do recognise the shortcomings and we will try to intro-

duce new policies so that we can progress."

Badawi's task now is to form a new government under the Barisan Nasional, which is made up of 14 race-based parties including ethnic Chinese and Indian parties that were annihilated in the polls.

The Star newspaper said in an editorial that Barisan Nasional could consider reforming into a one-party, multi-racial organisation, to face the challenge from Keadilan which represents all three ethnic groups.

"The first page of the new Malaysian political era opens today," it said.

Malaysia's bourse was shaken by the political earthquake, leading to a one-hour suspension triggered when the bourse fell by more than 10 percent.

The main index finished down 123.11 points, or 9.5 percent, at 1,173.22 in the biggest tumble since the height of the Asian financial crisis in September 1998, when it dived 21 percent in a single session.

Badawi expressed confidence in Malaysia's fundamentals.

"The government of Barisan Nasional will be a strong government. We will ensure the economy continues to remain strong. Whatever actions we have taken are working well and has been welcomed by the private sector," he said.

Bhutto murder suspects back in Pak court

AFP, Rawalpindi

A Pakistani anti-terrorism court yesterday presented charge sheets to five suspected militants accused of involvement in the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, court officials said.

The five men were all arrested in the weeks following former premier Bhutto's slaying at a political rally in Rawalpindi on December 27 and last appeared at the court in the garrison city adjoining Islamabad a week ago.

Judge Habibur Rehman ordered copies of the official charges to be provided to suspects Aitzaz Shah, Hasnain Gul, Abdul Rashid, Sher Zaman and Rafiqat -- who goes by one name, a court official told AFP.

The judge said that the men would be formally charged at the next hearing on March 18, he said, adding that some relatives were allowed to briefly meet the suspects.

Pakistani police earlier this month formally charged top Taliban and Al-Qaeda commander Baitullah Mehsud, who is holed up in the country's tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, with masterminding Bhutto's killing.

He remains at large and has denied any involvement.

Major storms sweep Britain, France

AFP, London

Heavy storms disrupted air, sea and road transport in Britain yesterday, while a cargo ship was swept onto a beach in France and one person reported missing, emergency officials said.

Dozens of flights were cancelled at British airports including London's Heathrow due to the storms, described as possibly the biggest of the winter by British experts, local reports said.

Belgium was also braced for the tempest, expected to last into Tuesday, with forests bordering Brussels closed to traffic for fear of trees being felled by the winds.

Amid gale-force winds of up to 80 mph (130 kph) sweeping in from the Atlantic and driving rain, British coastguards scrambled to help a stricken tanker in the Channel off the southern English coast, a spokesman said.

Airports were among the worst hit.

Tibetan exiles clash with Nepal police

AFP, Kathmandu

Hundreds of Tibetan activists clashed with police in Nepal's capital yesterday when protesters tried to march to the Chinese embassy, an AFP reporter said.

Police baton-charged the demonstrators after they had been pelted with stones.

At least two police and three protesters were injured, a reporter at the scene said.

"We have detained around 15 Tibetan protesters after the clash," said a police officer who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Around 4,000 Tibetans had gathered in Boudha, a Tibetan temple complex in Kathmandu, to mark the 49th anniversary of the Dalai Lama's escape to India after an abortive uprising in Lhasa.

Many in the Tibetan flag-waving crowd wore T-shirts calling for a "Free Tibet" and chanted slogans.

UN envoy ends Myanmar mission without promises

AFP, Yangon

UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari left Myanmar for Singapore yesterday, ending a five-day mission that included two meetings with democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi but few tangible concessions from the regime.

Gambari came here to press the regime to include the Nobel peace prize winner in its plans to hold a referendum in May and multiparty elections in 2010.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who led her National League for Democracy party to victory in 1990 polls, has been under house arrest for 12 of the last 18 years.

She was allowed to meet twice with Gambari, but no details on their talks have been given.

Gambari also held talks with the regime's information minister Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan just before and after his talks with Aung San Suu Kyi, the official said.

But diplomats who spoke with Gambari said his mission had not achieved any significant concessions.

"We have the impression that he did not obtain very much," one diplomat said on condition of anonymity.

"He said he was disappointed that he did not have any higher-level meetings," the diplomat said.

"He said the discussions were very frank, everything was put on the table," he said, adding that the regime insisted on the lifting of



This file handout photo sent out on March 8 shows UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari (R) speaking with Myanmar's detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a meeting in Yangon on Saturday.

western sanctions before any reforms could take place.

In its public statements, the regime has rebuffed every overture made by Gambari, while denying him access to junta leader Than Shwe and stonewalling his efforts to broker a meaningful dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi.

The generals have also rejected

his offer to provide foreign observers for an upcoming May referendum on a new constitution.

Myanmar surprised the world a month ago by announcing the referendum on the charter.

A new law on the referendum sharply restricts the NLD's ability to campaign, outlawing public speeches and leaflets on the text.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Blunder may prove costly to Badawi

AP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's prime minister may have made his biggest political blunder by calling early elections that only exposed public anger over simmering racial tensions and his perceived missteps.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's ruling coalition was dealt a string of defeats in Saturday's general elections, which analysts said Sunday will place him under pressure to resign.

"He misread the signs. A lot of people were voting against Badawi," said Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, a human rights lawyer and political commentator. "He became the face of the mismanagement of the country. People were beginning to really, really dislike him despite his affable demeanor."

The opposition gained control of five of Malaysia's 13 states and a third of its parliament in the biggest electoral upset in the country's history. Abdullah's National Front coalition lost its two-thirds majority in the 222-member parliament for the first time in four decades, winning only a simple majority of 139 seats.

The results were seen as a verdict against a string of perceived missteps by Abdullah, 68, and his failure to fulfill promises made ahead of the 2004 elections, which the National Front won in its biggest victory ever.

Among those missteps, analysts



Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi reads a document before addressing journalists at a press conference in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

said, Abdullah ignored Malaysia's widening poverty gap and increasing cost of living. He made his son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin one of his advisers. And when the southern state of Johor was struggling after floods in late 2006, Abdullah was in Perth to inaugurate his brother's curry restaurant.

Some even criticised him for remarrying less than two years after his first wife died of cancer and then engaging in public displays of affection.

Abdullah's next big test will come later this year when he faces the

general assembly of the United Malays National Organization, the largest party in the National Front coalition. A date has not yet been set.

"The reality is that there will be tremendous pressure within UMNO for him (Abdullah) to step down," said Bridget Welsh of the Johns Hopkins University, an expert on Southeast Asia who was in Malaysia to monitor the polls.

The National Front is a coalition of 11 small parties and three major ones that represent Malaysia's main ethnic groups: the majority Muslim Malays who make up 60

percent of the 27 million population, the Chinese at 25 percent and Indians at 8 percent.

Traditionally, Malays have voted for UMNO, the Chinese for the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Indians for the Malaysian Indian Congress.

The power-sharing arrangement has worked as long as the three races believed only their parties could look after their respective communities' interests. But the minorities have become increasingly disappointed with their parties.

The Chinese and Indians are angry about an affirmative action program known as the New Economic Policy that has given Malays preference in jobs, education, business, housing, finance and religion since 1971.

They also worry that their religious rights are being eroded by the government.

Ordinary Malays also are unhappy, many charging that the benefits of the New Economic Policy are being reaped only by rich and well-connected Malays.

Repressive police tactics haven't helped ease the tension. In October, officers dispersed thousands of people with tear gas and water cannons at a street protest for electoral and judicial reforms.

These frustrations were tapped by the opposition parties, which for the first time set aside their ideological differences and came together to pose a united challenge.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim campaigned on a platform that urged people to look outside race-based politics. Although the opposition parties are also identified by race, they have agreed to build a multiracial alliance where all races will be treated equally.

"What is crucial now is how the opposition works as a coalition," Welsh said. "The mandate given to them has created a national opposition for the first time."

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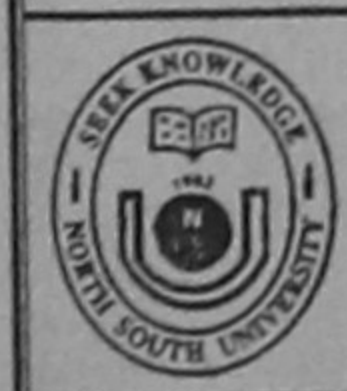
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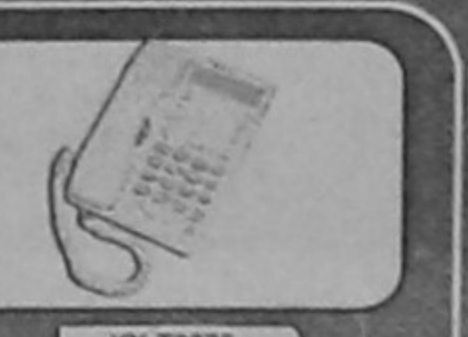
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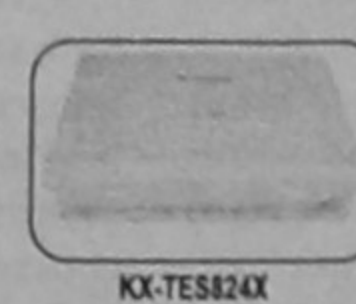
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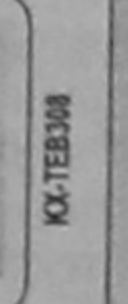
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