

Malaysian election: Biggest test for the ruling party



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

MALAYSIAN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak dissolved the parliament on April 3. Under Malaysian law the election must be held within 60 days of the dissolution of the parliament, and is scheduled for May 5.

Malaysia is a Muslim-majority nation and is home to more than 28 million people with various ethnic and religious backgrounds. More than 50% of the population is Malay. Chinese and Indians make up around 25% and 7%, respectively.

Malaysia's 13 million voters face a stark choice at the election between the ruling party that has brought decades of strong economic growth or a new era of sweeping change under Anwar's three-party alliance.

The ruling party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), controls 136 seats in the 222-seat Parliament. An opinion survey conducted by the University of Malaya showed 42% of respondents supporting the UMNO, with 37% supporting the opposition and 21% undecided.

Speaking in a live television broadcast on April 3, Najib urged voters to stay the course. "Don't gamble on the future of your children and Malaysia; think and contemplate because your vote will determine not only the future of the country, but also of your grandchildren," he said.

Since taking office four years ago, Najib has undertaken through reforms aimed at outflanking Anwar's supporters and containing a growing clamour for greater accountability and more democracy.

Najib also has moved to sell off state assets, reducing the government's influence over the economy in a bid to spur growth. Last year's initial public offering of palm-oil plantation concern Felda Global Ventures raised more than \$3 billion, while the broader economy expanded 5.6% in 2012.

He slowly began dismantling an affirmative-action programme designed to help the majority ethnic-Malay Muslim population catch up with generally wealthier ethnic Chinese. Razak is promising tax breaks, cheaper cars and higher cash payments to the poor to try to boost the ruling coalition's appeal.

But opposition members say they've heard it all

before -- in fact, they claim they proposed nearly the same agenda in February. "It seems they (the ruling coalition) have taken several leaves off our book," said Dzulkefly Ahmad, a member of the opposition Pan Islamic Party.

The opposition, which portrays the ruling party as an authoritarian and corrupt force, promises reforms. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim told reporters on April 3: "I believe Malaysians are prepared for change ... , unlike some countries where it is done through popular uprising, in our case it will be translated through the ballot box."

It is reported Anwar has campaigned relentlessly, tapping into a desire for swifter reform among younger Malaysians by pledging more transparency, a tougher stance on corruption, and plans to eliminate the affirmative-action policies.

The race is already shaping up to be the most important and closely fought contest since independence from Britain in 1957, and one that could radically alter the future of what is widely regarded as one of the world's most dynamic Muslim-majority nations.

Observers say Anwar has worked to bridge divisions within the opposition, which includes the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, his own People's Justice Party and the Democratic Action Party, which mostly appeals to ethnic Chinese voters, and to turn the loose alliance into an effective campaign machine.

A former student firebrand, Anwar rose through the ranks of United Malays National Organization, the main party in the ruling National Front in the 1980s, ultimately becoming deputy to former leader Mahathir Mohamad. They fell out over how to handle the economy during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis and Anwar spent six years in jail on dubious charges.

Internet has emerged as another important forum for political debate in the country.

For a fifth of Malaysia's 13 million registered voters, the general election will be the first time for them to cast their votes. Students from the University of Malay are among the nearly three million first-time voters

and will not waste their chance to participate in the upcoming election.

"I want change! I want a better future for me and my generation," says 20-year-old Halimah Salim. "You can't be creative if you are living in a silent era, with worries and anxieties about freedom of speech and expression."

Human rights activist, writer and film-maker Hishamuddin Rais reportedly said: "The opposition has a better chance this time. The coalition could win if the election is fair and free and there is no fraud."

22-year-old Mohamed Bukhairy, chairman of the federal student legislative body, is challenging Prime Minister Najib Razak for the premier's hometown parliamentary seat of Pekan. Observers say Najib's biggest challenge might be to keep the job of prime minister, even if the UMNO wins. He could face an internal challenge if he fails to improve on the government's current tally of 136 seats in the 222-seat Parliament.

The prime minister also faces a potential backlash among nationalist groups who fear he is giving up too many privileges accorded the ethnic-Malay majority, who have enjoyed easier access to everything from state universities to housing loans. Conservatives such as lawmaker Ibrahim Ali warn that Malaysia under Najib is turning into a country they don't recognise.

Ibrahim Ali, a lawmaker, has formed a powerful lobby group to protect Malay interests that counts Dr. Mahathir, who ruled Malaysia for 22 years before stepping down in 2003, among its supporters. "The prime minister has to be cautious," said Dr. Mahathir in an interview last year. "He cannot go full steam ahead because he may face unexpected repercussions."

Many government critics, however, say Najib hasn't done enough to meet Malaysians' rising expectations for change. The race is already shaping up to be the most important and closely fought contest since independence from Britain in 1957, and one that could radically alter the future of what is widely regarded as one of the world's most dynamic Muslim-majority nations.

"Every vote is going to count in this election, and it will be a close race," said Bridget Welsh, a professor at Singapore Management University and a longtime observer of Malaysian politics.

The writer is a former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Hefajat-e-Islam's rally: Why are BNP intellectuals ecstatic?

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

BANGLADESH news media, both print and electronic, have been full of analyses following the relatively peaceful end of the grand rally organised by Hefajat-e-Islam (HI) on April 6. The nation was very tense as it watched with horror the violence perpetrated primarily by activists of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the BNP over the last two months or so. In many respects the extent and periphery of the current spate of violence are unprecedented, resulting in very high casualties on both the sides, the law enforcers and the demonstrators.

The nation breathed a sigh of relief as the rally, big by any standard, ended without any large scale violence as was eagerly expected by BNP-Jamaat who provided all sorts of logistical support in addition to changing of hands of huge amount of money, as reported in the media, to and from the stakeholders. The disappointment was most for the main opposition. Failing to organise any big movement against the government in spite of its logical demand to hold the next election under a non-party caretaker government, it was banking on large scale violence that could easily be expected from a rally as big as this, if the crowd was provoked to go astray -- as is being done, on regular basis, by the Jamaat-e-Islami activists.

In spite of Hefajat's diverse composition, including activists reportedly trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan who had fought Talibani battle in those two countries, thanks are due to the organisers that they were able to keep the crowd under control. It was an exemplary display of the exercise of the right to freedom of speech and assembly as enshrined in the constitution, no matter how much their 13-point demand contradicts the constitution.

Regrettably, the Hefajat leader did not repeat the same by threatening to prevent holding of the meeting of the Ganajagor mancha in Chittagong.

The Ganajagor mancha, from its very inception, has conducted itself in non-violent manner, complied with the request of the law enforcing agency and was not adamant on holding the rally. This has only enhanced its stature as a platform of reason to its millions of adherents and well-wishers, at home and abroad.

Hefajat-e-Islam; the name itself is a redundant proposition to start with, since Islam, from its introduction in Bengal in the eighth century, never needed any *hefajat* from a group or party. Its greatest protectors have always been its own followers who, at this time, stand at 150 million God-fearing Muslims.

The tradition of Islamic mysticism known as Sufism appeared very early in Islam and essentially became a popular movement emphasising worship out of love of God rather than fear. Sufi masters were the single most important factor in South Asian conversions to Islam, particularly in Bangladesh. Most Bangladeshi Muslims are influenced by Sufism. I lived in two Arab countries and observed how the Bangladeshi Muslims conduct themselves in practicing religion, I very often heard them saying: "Islam originated in the Arab land, but settled in Bangladesh."

Neither of the two major political parties can accommodate the demands raised by the Hefajat. Yet, it is beyond any comprehension as to why the BNP intellectuals are so ecstatic, as evidenced from their write-ups, about the outcome of Hefajat's rally.

A Bengali's Muslim and Bengali identities, throughout history, were never in collision, rather in collusion. In fact, it was not the Muslim identity, but the Bengali identity that was under challenge, not once, but twice; once in 1952 that gave rise to the language movement, and another in 1971 when existence of Bengali nation was at stake before and during the War of Liberation.

The rally got prominence not because of its 13-point demand -- all but one of which are common for most of the Islamic parties -- but because of its size. The exceptional one is the third one that says: "Stop all propaganda and 'derogatory comments' about Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) by the 'atheist leaders' of the Shahbagh movement, bloggers and other anti-Islamists; arrest them and ensure stern punishment to them." This is the point that enticed the madrasa students, most of whom come from poor and lower-

middle class, to come out in record numbers to vent their anger; albeit most of them do not know what a "blog" is and who "bloggers" are.

The Shahbagh movement, as it is popularly known, has nothing whatsoever to do with religion, and the leaders of the movement have declared it vociferously over and over again. Yet, one "brave editor" and "noted BNP intellectuals," most of whom are former pro-Chinese ultra-leftists, are constantly propagating blunt lies to malign a movement that has touched the hearts and souls of Bengalis all around the globe.

HI's demand list neither contains support for the war criminals trials, nor does it include words such as "we also support the trials provided they are transparent, of international standard, etc. etc." Although it is politically neutral, it was a big disappointment for BNP. *The Daily Star's* headline on April 8 captured the BNP's disappointment with the headline "Hefajat breaks BNP's heart."

At the end, neither of the two major political parties can accommodate the demands raised by the Hefajat. In fact, in a recent BBC dialogue, both General Mahbubur Rhaman of BNP and information minister Hasanul Haque Inu expressed identical views vis-à-vis the Hefajat's demands. Yet, it is beyond any comprehension as to why the BNP intellectuals are so ecstatic, as evidenced from their write-ups, about the outcome of Hefajat's rally.

Ours is a country that was born out of a War of Liberation at the cost of the lives of three million martyrs. They made the supreme sacrifice, not only for an independent country but also for values that we must uphold. The current government received an overwhelming mandate of the people in the last election in favour of its election platform as well as for the values and virtues that formed the cornerstones of the struggle that the party itself led. The government has no mandate to accept any demand that is contrary to the existing provisions of the constitution or of their mandated election platform. If Hefajat is serious about the demands, the option is always open to it to form a political party and go to the people and ask for endorsement in the forthcoming election. That's what democracy is all about.

The writer is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

BANGLADESH AT A CROSSROADS

A humble appeal to our leaders

SYED WASIFUL ISLAM

I think we all agree that the nation is passing through a very crucial stage. It appears that there is zero tolerance amongst the contenders for the "Chair." The nature of this intolerance may well bring destruction for the whole nation.

It appears that Awami League, the ruling party, is fast degenerating into a fascist type government. Their indiscriminate arrests of opposition leaders, assault, murders, police brutality, remands, torture, death in police custody, are being carried out in the name of democracy.

BNP, the opposition, are unnecessarily hard and cruel in their reactions. How many *hartsals* have they called? How many crores of taka are lost in one day of *hartsal*? How much damage have they done to life and property? Our economy is on the verge of collapse, our children are bewildered, the poor cannot work and feed their families.

Jamaat-e-Islami are equally ferocious, killing police, cutting off tendons, carrying out clandestine murder, destroying public property etc.

Whose life and whose property are these people playing with? Who has asked them to act as 'god'?

These are human beings you are killing, maiming, terrorising; these are our own brothers, citizens of Bangladesh. They are duty bound to safeguard the life property and honour of our fellow man. But look at what are doing? How can they carry out such acts of barbarism? We beseech the leaders of the nation, please pull back your hoodlums, put away your weapons, stop this madness of internal strife taking us to a state of civil war.

Do you not see that in your mad rush to usurp power, you are hurting your own kind? Can you look that mother in the eye, whose son has been shot dead either by the police or your thugs? No you cannot. What has happened? Have we lost our morality, our uprightness, has our sense of judgement dimmed due to being intoxicated by the love of power and position and greed for wealth?

Recently, a new group emerged demanding death penalty for war all criminals, mainly Jamaat-e-Islamis. The so-called Shahbaghis, consisting of bloggers, students, intellectuals etc., started off well but got bogged down due to over-zealousness of a few and crossing all limits by demeaning Islam and the holy Prophet of Islam (sm).

For the sake of our people, please don't add to their misery. We request you to rise above petty politics, act as leaders of a young and vibrant nation, which is our beautiful Bangladesh. Sit together, talk, have mutual respect for your divergent views and work out a viable, workable solution.

The long march of Hefajat and its huge gathering of more than a million people, according to some estimates, from all walks of life have spelled out in unequivocal terms that people in Bangladesh love Allah and His holy Prophet (sm).

As for the apolitical Hefajat-e-Islam people, Islamic scholars and thinkers, with due respect, we expect from them guidance for the teeming millions, as well as sound advice for the government, pointing out where they are deviating from the principles of good governance and just rule. Examples of good governance abound in the biographies of the Holy Prophet (sm), Hazrat Umar (ra), Khalifa Omar bin Abdul Aziz (ra). But do we have time to read them? Or even ask those who know?

We expect from our respected scholars, restraint, tolerance, wisdom and sagacity, because people love them as being pious followers of Quran and Hadis, people who follow the noble and holy Prophet of Islam (sm) in thought, words and deeds. We don't expect *hartsals* etc from them, (which hurts the common man).

So please, for the sake of our people, please don't add to their misery. We request you to rise above petty politics, act as leaders of a young and vibrant nation, which is our beautiful Bangladesh.

Sit together, talk, have mutual respect for your divergent views and work out a viable, workable solution.

It's just a personal feeling, but if Sheikh Hasina decides to reinstate the caretaker government provision, peace and tranquility may return. With one stroke, she will not only win the hearts of millions, but may well be looked on as a saviour of Bangladesh from mass destruction. Further, this may tip the scale in her favour come election time.

But it all depends on whose advice she is taking.

If you think you need international refereeing, observers or via media, get some neutral powers to help you, but please for the sake of God Almighty, don't become a means for the destruction of a nation. Act before it's too late, before you face the wrath and fury of the people.

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