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THE 2004 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN MALAYSIA

A Mandate to Rule

_____ Abdul Rashid Moten and
===== Tunku Mohar Mokhtar

Abstract

The ruling coalition in Malaysia received an overwhelming mandate to rule in the general elections held in 2004. The major opposition party, which ran an aggressive campaign for an Islamic agenda, suffered a crushing defeat. The election results can be seen as an endorsement of Prime Minister Abdullah's style of moderate governance.

Keywords: Malaysia, 2004 elections, Badawi factor, Islam, fractured opposition, Barisan Nasional

Malaysia is a relative newcomer to the world of the democratic nation-state. It was only in 1963 that the Federation of Malaysia emerged fully from the yoke of British colonialism. In less than 50 years, Malaysia has established a functioning democratic state that has managed to unite various cultural and religious groups and has made significant progress on the march toward developed-nation status.

Malaysia operates a federal parliamentary system with the king, known as the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, as the constitutional head. It has a bicameral Parliament composed of a 69-member, largely non-elected, upper house (Dewan Negara) and a popularly elected House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat). The Dewan Rakyat consists of 219 members elected from single-member districts by universal suffrage. Each of Malaysia's 13 states has a legislature elected in

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the same manner. The country's Constitution stipulates that parliamentary and state elections be held every five years. It also empowers the king, on the advice of the prime minister, to dissolve Parliament and thus undertake fresh elections. The Constitution provides for an independent Election Commission (EC) with the authority to conduct elections. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia's commitment to democracy has been indicated by the fact that it has conducted 10 general elections at the national and state levels with a high degree of public participation. Before the 2004 elections, the previous polls were held on November 29, 1999.

On March 4, 2004, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi advised the constitutional monarch to dissolve the House of Representatives, paving the way for the eleventh national elections. The government's five-year term was set to expire that November, but early polls had been expected since former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad voluntarily stepped down in October 2003. Abdullah's United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which has supplied every prime minister since Malaysia's founding, leads a 14-party ruling coalition known as Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN). It was widely expected that the elections would extend BN's 50-year-long rule and reverse gains that the party's biggest rival, the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS), made in the last elections. In 1999, five BN ministers were defeated and its share of the Malay vote shrank from 63% to 49%, but BN won 148 of the 193 parliamentary seats. Since that time, BN obtained three additional seats when Parti Bersatu Sabah (United Sabah Party, PBS) joined the coalition in January 2002 and another by winning the Pendang seat in a by-election that July. Prior to the dissolution of Parliament and the state assemblies, PAS held 26 parliamentary seats and 98 state seats, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) had 10 parliamentary and 11 state seats, and Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party, KeADILan) controlled five parliamentary and five state seats.¹

In precipitating the 2004 elections, Abdullah, who took office on October 31, 2003, was seeking his first mandate. With Parliament dissolved, nominations for parliamentary and state assembly seats were held on March 13, 2004, and elections took place March 21. The intervening eight days were used for campaigning. The political parties, in fact, had been actively campaigning in various ways for some time: according to the EC chairman, over the previous four years the police had issued 11,692 permits to political parties to conduct campaign-related activities.²

1. See Abdul Rashid Moten, "The 1999 General Elections in Malaysia: Toward a Stable Democracy?" in *Akademika* 57 (July 2000), pp. 67–86.

2. *Sunday Straits Times*, March 14, 2004.

The Redelineation Exercise

At stake in the eleventh general elections were 219 parliamentary and 505 state legislative assembly seats (excluding the Sarawak state legislative assembly).³ Compared to the 1999 general elections, this means an increase of 26 parliamentary and 111 state seats. The increase in the number of parliamentary constituencies was prompted by a redelineation of district lines carried out by the EC in 2003. The increase in the state seats derived from the new state assembly constituencies and the inclusion of the 60 Sabah state assembly seats. For the first time in its history, the state of Sabah held its parliamentary and state assembly elections simultaneously with Peninsular Malaysian states.

Article 113 (1 and 2) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution provides for an EC that—in addition to running elections—is also empowered to keep electoral rolls and review constituencies. The Constitution also contains the principle of “rural weightage.” A rural vote counts for more than an urban vote because on the whole, rural constituencies contain fewer electors. The political significance of this “weightage” is that it ensures domination of the system by ethnic Malays because the rural areas are predominantly Malay. For instance, of the 26 newly created parliamentary seats, 21 are in the peninsula and the remaining five in Sabah. Of the 21 seats, 13 are Malay-majority seats and two are Chinese-majority; in the remaining six seats no ethnic group forms a majority although the Malays are the largest plurality.⁴

The redelineation, announced by the EC on August 9, 2002, has increased the number of Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies. Nevertheless, of 13 new Malay-majority constituencies, only three had more than 80% Malay voters. On the other hand, there were only five out of 21 new constituencies where the Chinese constitute less than 20% of the voters. This points to a pattern of increased mixed constituencies, a situation in which BN performed well in the past two general elections. Although the redelineation does not directly affect electoral outcomes, it does increase BN’s chances in these new constituencies.⁵

The opposition parties, as usual, complained of gerrymandering. They complained that the redelineation of electoral boundaries, concluded in 2003, resulted in the creation of additional seats, especially in the semi-urban areas where BN had performed extremely well in 1999. No additional parliamentary

3. For the 2004 general elections, only 505 seats were contested. The Sarawak state assembly, which has 62 seats, held its state election in 2001, and the next one is due in 2006.

4. Authors’ calculation based on <<http://www.undi.info>>, accessed March 3, 2004; and the *Sunday Star*, March 14, 2004.

5. See, inter alia, K. Ong, “The 2002 Delimitation Exercise: Systematically Favoring the BN?” in *Aliran Monthly* 22:8 (2002); and Lim Hong Hai, “New Rules and Constituencies for New Challenges,” *ibid.*, 23:6 (2003), pp. 7–9.

seats were added to Kelantan, Terengganu, or Kedah states where PAS had scored huge successes. Instead, Sabah got an additional five seats, Johor another six, Selangor five, Pahang three, and Penang two. In these states also, BN had performed well in 1999. Moreover, the electoral boundaries were redrawn in two of the four Malay heartland states in the north, Kelantan and Kedah. Major changes have also been made to Perak's electoral boundaries. All these changes have benefited BN. The opposition parties complained to the EC with no positive outcome.

Candidates and the Parties

A total of 448 candidates contested the 219 seats in the Dewan Rakyat. Of these candidates, 219 belonged to the ruling BN and 198 to various opposition parties. The remaining 31 ran as independent candidates. For the 505 state legislative assemblies, political parties nominated 1,017 candidates, while 89 ran as independents.

BN alone could nominate candidates for all the parliamentary and state seats. PAS filed the largest number of candidates with 86 for parliamentary seats and 262 for state assembly seats, followed closely by KeADILan with 58 and 118, respectively. DAP nominated 44 for the parliamentary seats and 106 for the state assembly seats. Parti Demokratik Setiasehati Kuasa Rakyat Bersatu Sabah (Sabah United People's Democratic Party, SETIA) fielded one parliamentary and 14 state assembly candidates. The Malaysian Democratic Party (MDP) ran one parliamentary candidate in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. Of the two Sarawak-based parties, the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) nominated seven candidates and the State Reform Party (STAR) nominated one for parliamentary seats. The parties fielded no candidates at the state level because Sarawak did not hold elections for state seats in conjunction with those of other states. Parti Barisan Rakyat Sabah Bersekutu (Sabah United People's Front, Bersekutu), a Sabah-based party, did not take part in parliamentary elections but nominated 12 candidates for state assembly seats.⁶ Of the total nominated candidates, 99 were women. About RM 15.6 million (\$4.1 million) worth of deposits were collected on Nomination Day.⁷

Interestingly, 186 parliamentary and 434 state seats saw direct one-to-one contests. A total of 12 parliamentary and 39 state assembly constituencies had three candidates each. In other words, in these constituencies the BN candidate was challenged by two opposition candidates. In the state of Sabah, there were nine parliamentary and 22 state constituencies where the number of contestants

6. *Sunday Star*, March 14, 2004

7. A deposit is a cash bond that must be lodged by candidates with the EC, to be returned if they achieve one-eighth of the total number of votes polled by all the candidates in the constituency, otherwise it is forfeited.

exceeded three, and in one state constituency, eight contestants ran. This was because of the mushrooming of local parties and an increasing number of independent candidates.

BN is a multiethnic alliance but also constitutes a party in its own right.⁸ It has its own constitution; in elections it behaves like a single party by putting forward a common team of candidates contesting under a single banner. Given the plural nature of Malaysian society, political leaders of various ethnic groups have opted for a consensus politics through the formation of BN.⁹ UMNO is the dominant party, followed by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and other smaller parties. As a ruling coalition representing various ethnic groups, BN professes multiculturalism; within the coalition, each party safeguards the ethnic interests it represents. Candidates for office are nominated through a complicated process of seat-sharing. The time-tested formula behind the distribution of seats is that the parties will not field candidates against each other and each will contest where it is most likely to win. After its not-so-impressive victory in 1999, BN has strengthened and emerged into a more cohesive force. The coalition's two major Chinese parties, MCA and Parti Gerakan Rakyat (Malaysian People Movement, Gerakan), which had subtly undermined each other in the last elections, have buried their differences, holding joint Chinese New Year and unity gatherings and campaigning together. MCA has changed leaders from Dr. Ling Liong Sik to Ong Ka Ting.

Among the opposition, PAS is a Malay-based Islamic party with a commitment to its goal of establishing an Islamic state. PAS has won the support of the predominantly Malay Muslim voters in the northern states. In an effort to reach out for non-Malay support, a week before the dissolution of Parliament the PAS president organized a PAS supporters club composed of non-Muslims, mainly Chinese.¹⁰ In the 1999 elections PAS headed the opposition coalition known as Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front, BA) that included KeADILan, DAP, and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party, PRM).

KeADILan was launched on April 4, 1999, with Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, as its president. According to Wan Azizah, "We want to be a bridge between existing parties. We will cooperate with all political parties that champion the cause of justice and make right the wrongs in our system."¹¹ The party promised a just and

8. See Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

9. See Diane K. Mauzy, *Barisan Nasional: Coalition Government in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Marican and Sons, 1983).

10. *New Straits Times*, June 1, 1999.

11. *Asiaweek*, April 16, 1999, p. 21.

democratic administration, accountability, transparency, and rule of law in Malaysia and genuine multiethnic, multireligious cooperation and unity. In the 2004 elections, KeADILan formed an alliance with PAS that came to be known as the BA. Unlike BN, which is a registered party, BA is simply an understanding between the two parties and has no legal status.

DAP is professedly a non-communal party with a commitment to achieve a “Malaysian Malaysia.” It is strongly identified with the predominantly urban Chinese and has difficulty obtaining support from other groupings. Yet, the party did nominate Indian and Malay candidates in the 2004 elections. In the 1999 elections, DAP formed part of the opposition coalition but withdrew from BA in September 2001 as a protest against the Islamic-state agenda propagated by PAS.

Campaign Strategies

Campaigning for the eleventh general elections actually started long before the national parliament was dissolved. Officially, however, the election campaign period covered only eight days in March 2004, the shortest such period in Malaysia’s electoral history—perhaps in an effort to reduce the level of open political competition and thus contain ethnic sentiments from erupting into violence. The short period meant, however, that BN, with its extensive organization, control of the media, and massive funding, could convey its viewpoints to the electorate more effectively than any opposition party could. Campaigning assumed four major forms: poster wars, small group discussions (*ceramah*) or political rallies, door-to-door efforts, and electronic means including use of the Internet and mobile phone companies’ short message services (SMS).

Posters, leaflets, and billboards appeared frequently throughout the country. The flags and banners of BN could be seen everywhere. The party erected some 3,000 billboards at strategically chosen roundabouts and junctions and along highways across Malaysia. The theme of BN’s advertising blitz was “Clean” (meaning no blatant or crude attacks), “Soft” (meaning subtle), and “Kind” (meaning gentle and informative). This was in sharp contrast to the 1999 general election, when agencies hired to make the commercials used a “sledgehammer” approach in dealing with political opponents. This time Abdullah reportedly insisted on a clean campaign. BN billboards highlighted the achievements of the coalition government and profiled the prime minister distributing food to the poor and kissing and hugging orphans and the needy.

Although PAS, DAP, and KeADILan did take part in the poster wars, their flags and leaflets were only visible in and around election operation centers. Opposition candidates, in several interviews with the authors, admitted that they had printed their posters late and were constrained by limited resources. Parties also bought advertising space in newspapers. Once again, BN had an edge because it controls major Malaysian media outlets. Almost the entire print

media, plus radio stations and television channels, devoted much of their news programs and election coverage to promoting the government's achievements. Over the eight-day campaign, BN bought approximately 1,100 pages of full-page colored ads in all local newspapers. The opposition used their own bimonthly and monthly magazines to reach out to the people. BN took the campaigning one step further by placing large helium-filled balloons with the BN logo atop high-rise structures where they could be spotted from a distance.

In addition, the contesting parties made greater use of the Internet than previously to reach the voters. Many political parties had created their own websites long before the elections were announced. For the opposition parties, which get little mainstream media coverage, the Internet provides access to a wider audience. UMNO and MCA maintain interactive websites that provide details about party history, programs, and major political news breaks. Similarly, PAS, DAP, and KeADILan offer well-designed websites with much information about party policies and programs. Websites such as Malaysiakini, Aliran.com, Agendadaily, and several others provide a medley of news updates on current affairs and a forum for debate on issues in Malaysian politics and economy.

Political parties had also made extensive use of mobile phone services. KeADILan, DAP, and the Youth and Puteri (lit., princess) wings of UMNO, among others, campaigned by SMS.¹² UMNO Youth and the Puteri wings created a special SMS campaign called the SMS Blast System to endear BN candidates to voters. Among the opposition, PAS offered information services via SMS for 50 sen (13 cents) per message. The money was donated to the poverty fund of *Harakah* (Movement), PAS's bimonthly publication. Recipients of messages received the headlines and lead paragraphs of *Harakah's* top stories daily and notices about the time and venue of *ceramah*.

The parties also used *ceramah* to reach out to and feel the pulse of the people. Most of the *ceramah* were held on open ground; some targeted specific groups of about 100 to 200 people. The *ceramah* were usually held at night. Compared to 1999, *ceramah* in the 2004 election were few and largely devoid of high-spirited public speeches. This might have been because of EC's constant reminders about the Election Offenses Act of 1954 that forbade personal attacks, character assassination, and inciting of religious and racial sentiments. Most parties preferred door-to-door campaigning. Dressed simply, candidates visited houses and marketplaces, distributing free food and supplies while explaining their stands and soliciting votes. The participants took the elections

12. Puteri UMNO was created in 1999, with its membership open to Malay women aged 18 to 35. Its major aim is to gain support from young Malay voters, who were perceived to be more inclined toward the opposition.

seriously, spending massive amounts of money mobilizing voters and organizing polls and demonstrating considerable faith in the legitimacy of electoral politics.

Campaign Issues

The BN campaign was based on the promise of a better future. The party's 15-page glossy pamphlet described BN as moving "Toward Excellence, Glory, and Distinction."¹³ The manifesto stated that under BN-rule Malaysia has seen political stability, economic development, and racial harmony. The country remains free to form its own political and economic systems and to overcome socioeconomic problems through the process of consultation. The document sets out BN's plan to strengthen the economy, chiefly by turning agriculture, biotechnology, and Islamic financial services into new sources of wealth. BN pledged to improve (a) service at all front-line agencies, (b) integrity of the police force through an independent royal commission, and (c) the level of personal safety for every individual. BN asserted it would ensure production of high caliber graduates and improve integration among students. In the religious sphere, BN pledged to promote Islam Hadhari (Progressive Islam), improve application of *shari'ah* laws, and ensure that Muslim women have access to a fair and just legal system.

BN's manifesto also states: "Barisan Nasional is unique because it represents all ethnic groups in Malaysia. All groups have a stake in Malaysia's development. This makes Barisan Nasional the best and the most effective power sharing formula today."¹⁴ Some three million copies of the manifesto were distributed to all BN election constituencies. Although BN campaigned throughout the country, its electioneering effort was concentrated mainly in four states: Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis, and Kedah. The aim was to recapture Terengganu and make significant inroads into Kelantan, most of which was lost to PAS in the 1999 elections amid anger over the sacking and jailing of ex-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.¹⁵

The two-party alliance Barisan Alternatif—composed of PAS and KeADILan—issued its own joint election manifesto, titled "Together New Malaysia: Prosperity for All." The 14-page pamphlet took a comprehensive stance covering issues relating to rights, religion and culture, development, health, education,

13. BN, *Toward a Malaysia of Excellence, Glory, and Distinction* [2004 Elections Manifesto] (Kuala Lumpur: Barisan Nasional, 2004).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

15. Anwar, sacked from UMNO, was sentenced in 1999 to six years in prison for corruption and in 2000 to an additional nine years for sodomy, charges he denied and that many observers saw as fabricated and politically inspired. A federal court freed Anwar in September 2004, overturning the sodomy charges. However, he is barred from reentering partisan politics until 2008.

business, employment, environment, and the future in a new Malaysia. The manifesto defined Islam as a way of life for Muslims and upheld the religious and cultural rights of non-Muslims. It promised to heed widespread calls for abolition of the Internal Security Act and to end the practice of detention without trial. Furthermore, the document offered to review all restrictive laws (such as the Official Secrets Act, the Sedition Act, and the like) that it said were oppressive and violated basic human rights. BA's platform would limit the prime minister's tenure to two five-year terms and bolster the business environment by cutting bureaucracy and bringing the corporate income tax rate down to 20% from the existing 28%. For ordinary people, BA promised to abolish highway tolls and cut vehicle prices by 10% from 2005, reduce electricity and water charges, and offer free primary and secondary schooling to all Malaysians.¹⁶ The PAS president hoped that "the people will support us to form a new Malaysia and ensure prosperity for all."¹⁷ The opposition used the media, *Harakah*, *Suara PRM* (Voices of PRM), *Berita KeADILan* (KeADILan News), *the Rocket*, and other means to present its side of the story. Most of the BA message was negative, detailing what the alliance sees as the excesses of the BN government but not indicating how the opposition plans to right the wrong.

For its part, DAP felt the country was facing "twin key challenges." One was to prevent the Islamic elements from turning Malaysia into an Islamic state. The second was to bring about real and meaningful changes to the system. DAP reiterated that an Islamic state is unsuitable for multireligious and multiracial Malaysia because such a system would further divide Muslims from non-Muslims, in addition to the *bumiputra*/non-*bumiputra* divide that already exists.¹⁸ The choice in the general election was not between models of Islamic states but to vote for the preservation of a secular democracy. DAP also argued that although the new prime minister has brought about an air of change through his promises to combat corruption, reduce red tape, and improve the quality of the public service, the system has yet to see meaningful change. Therefore, people were encouraged to vote for and strengthen DAP so that they could monitor the implementation of the promises made by Abdullah Badawi. DAP demanded fundamental changes to make Malaysia a truly democratic, free, and just home for all.¹⁹

16. *Manifesto Barisan Alternatif, 2004* (Kuala Lumpur: Panel Manifesto PAS and KeADILan, 2004).

17. *Harakah*, April 1–15, 2004.

18. *Bumiputra* (lit., son of the soil), refers to the Malays and natives of the Peninsula, Sabah, and Sarawak. In 1969, as an immediate response to the ethnic Malay-Chinese riot of May 13, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) to help the *bumiputra* compete economically with Chinese Malaysians.

19. "DAP Manifesto for General Election 2004," <<http://www.dapmalaysia.org/election2004/mani/mani-nat.htm>>, accessed March 22, 2004.

Islam: The Core Issue

The manifestos of the parties covered several issues. However, religion was the core issue of this election, pitting the progressive approach adopted by Abdullah Badawi and UMNO against the evidently narrow interpretation of Islam by PAS and the secular democracy advocated by DAP. As the predominant Malaysian Islamic party, PAS wants to make Malaysia an Islamic state; it earlier passed the *shari'ah* criminal code (*hudud*) in the two states it controlled but could not actually enforce the code. Generally, this is because *hudud* law is unconstitutional: according to the Ninth Schedule of the Federal Constitution, the state government does not have the jurisdiction to impose *hudud*; the law overlaps with the Federal Penal Code; and its proposed punishments far exceeded the limitations provided by the Shari'ah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction Act 1965, as amended in 1984).²⁰ PAS adopted the slogan "Islam for All," which formed the theme of its separate manifesto for Terengganu. The manifesto stressed an administrative system based on the Qur'an, an economic program run in accordance with Islam, and religious freedom for non-Muslims.

Mainstream newspapers carried news of PAS leaders suggesting that pro-government voters would end up in hell. The party told voters to focus on the hereafter. This apparently did not impress many voters, who wanted to know what the candidates were going to do to help them break out of poverty, find jobs, and develop their communities.

DAP took a totally opposite stand on the question of an Islamic state, saying that such a transformation would be unconstitutional and would contravene the social contract agreed upon by the founding fathers of Malaysia. The founders agreed upon a Malaysia that is democratic, secular, multireligious, tolerant, and progressive, with Islam as the official religion. DAP reiterated that an Islamic state would be unsuitable for such a plural society because it would create new cleavages while reinforcing existing ones. The party's major emphasis was to bury the question of an Islamic state once and for all.²¹

Abdullah did not get involved in the debate over secularism versus Islam. He was determined to respond to PAS and what is often seen as its adherence to faith at the expense of human and national development. The prime minister did not oppose mixing religion and politics. Rather, he was asking the people to be religious but not to abandon their responsibilities in this world. His alternative of the moderate and progressive Islam Hadhari, which encouraged Muslims to pursue knowledge, acquire science and technology, and get ahead

20. Muhammad Hashim Kamali, *Punishment in Islamic Law: An Enquiry into the Hudud Bill of Kelantan* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute for Policy Research, 1995), pp. 11–18. The Shari'ah courts apply Islamic personal laws in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and related areas to Muslims in Malaysia.

21. "DAP Manifesto for General Election 2004."

has proved more attractive than the PAS alternative. Abdullah told farmers in Kelantan that he had a “sacred obligation” to bring them development: “I want to tell all Muslims, don’t be poor, don’t be backward, don’t be oppressed, don’t be manipulated. Why live in poverty? It is shameful.”²² This sentiment appealed not only to Malaysians’ sense of pride but also their common sense, and proved to be popular.

The Results

In the run-up to the 2004 election, the EC did not reject nomination papers on the basis of technical errors. However, 20 candidates were disqualified for their inability to adhere to electoral regulations. One PAS parliamentary candidate was disqualified because he had been declared bankrupt. The BN candidate knew of the bankruptcy but mentioned it only during the brief nominating period, making it impossible for PAS to find a replacement.²³ Other candidates either failed to pay a candidacy deposit or did not produce proper documents on time.

A new rule enforced in this election provided for a withdrawal period of approximately three days. A total of 12 candidates withdrew from the race. In an incident, two men were detained by the Anti-Corruption Agency for allegedly trying to bribe an opposition candidate to withdraw so that the BN candidate could win uncontested. The prime minister denounced the reported bribery attempt and told the agency to handle the case according to the law.²⁴ As a result of withdrawal and disqualification, 17 parliamentary and 12 state seats were won uncontested. All 17 parliamentary seats went to BN. Of the state seats, 11 were won uncontested by BN and one seat was won by PAS in Johor. This is the first time in Malaysia’s political history that a PAS member will sit in the Johor state assembly. In the final analysis, elections took place for 202 parliamentary and 493 state assembly seats.

The elections were held as scheduled; candidates and their supporters apparently adhered to laws and regulations. Police received 144 reports throughout polling day, but none dealt with major untoward incidents.²⁵ There were nonetheless problems in some polling centers, mainly in Selangor, Sabah, and Sarawak. Some voters complained that computers had broken down at some centers; many voters reportedly refused to vote out of frustration.

Based on the latest verified electoral rolls, 10.28 million Malaysians were eligible to vote. About 800,000 were first-time voters and another 200,700—mainly army and police personnel—cast their absentee ballots by mail. Alto-

22. *Star*, March 8, 2004.

23. *New Straits Times*, March 18, 2004.

24. See “Haul’em to Court, ACA Told,” *ibid.*, March 23, 2004.

25. *New Straits Times*, March 23, 2004.

gether some 7,500 polling stations were opened for a single day of voting from 8 A.M. to 5 P.M.; results were declared within hours of the polls' closing. The government made use of technology in the electoral process. For instance, registered voters could check via SMS to see if they were on the electoral rolls, a process that takes a few seconds. Voter turnout ranged between 70% and 85%. One parliamentary constituency (P125 in Putrajaya) registered a turnout of 91.79%. One state constituency (N21 in Telemung) in Terengganu registered a turnout of 90.33%. The turnout was higher in the peninsula than in Sabah and Sarawak, where it ranged between 55% and 77%. The turnout figures compare favorably with those in many Western democracies.

The election results took most Malaysians by surprise, including some top UMNO leaders, who had not expected such a big win. The ruling BN coalition won 90.4% of the seats in Parliament, its best showing since it was formed in 1974. BN won 62.37% of the total votes cast, up from 56.5% in 1999. It made a clean sweep of all parliamentary seats in seven states, winning 198 seats and scoring a nine-tenths majority (see Table 1). The coalition won 62.37% of the popular vote—4,430,908 ballots out of a total 7.10 million who cast their votes. The opposition taken together managed only 20 seats. One independent candidate won a seat in Sabah. For the state assemblies, a state-by-state analysis of the voting shows that BN won all but one seat each in Pahang, Perlis, Johor, and Sabah. In another four states, BN conceded only two seats each to the opposition. Surprisingly, BN recaptured the state of Terengganu from PAS and almost won the state of Kelantan but for two seats.

The coalition's key component, UMNO, performed extremely well, winning 92% of the seats it contested. Abdullah Badawi retained his parliamentary seat for the seventh consecutive term with an increased majority of 18,122 votes. His deputy, Najib Tun Razak, won his own parliamentary seat by a majority of 22,922 votes. In 1999, Najib had won his seat by a mere 241 votes. Most UMNO candidates won by huge margins. UMNO's success in attracting significant Malay support was clearly noticeable in the state elections (see Table 2). In Terengganu, UMNO won all eight parliamentary seats and 27 of the 32 state seats, garnering 55% of popular votes, while MCA won one. In Kelantan, the stronghold of PAS, UMNO received 49% of the votes and won 21 of the 45 state seats, as compared to two seats in 1999. In Kedah, UMNO won 14 of the 15 parliamentary and 31 of the 36 state assembly seats. Thus, UMNO appeared to have won back some of the Malay support it lost in the 1999 elections. In the parliamentary seats, BN's Chinese and Indian partners performed well, with MCA winning 31 of 40 seats, Gerakan 10 of 12 seats, and MIC winning all nine seats it contested. For the state seats, MCA won 75 of the 90 seats, MIC won all the 19 seats, and Gerakan won 30 of the 31 seats it contested. Gerakan formed the state government in Penang, where it won the 13 seats it contested.

TABLE 1 *Parliamentary and State Seats Won by Political Parties in the 2004 General Elections*

States	Parliament					State					
	BN	DAP	PAS	ADIL	Ind.	Total	BN	DAP	PAS	Ind.	Total
Perlis	3					3	14		1		15
Kedah	14		1			15	31		5		36
Kelantan	9*		5*			14	21		24		45
Terengganu	8					8	28		4		32
Penang	8	4		1		13	38	1	1		40
Perak	21	3				24	52	7			59
Pahang	14					14	41	1			42
Selangor	22					22	54	2			56
Kuala Lumpur	7	4				11					
Labuan	1					1					
Putrajaya	1					1					
Neg. Sembilan	8					8	34	2			36
Melaka	6					6	26	2			28
Johor	26					26	55	1			56
Sabah	24				1	25	59			1	60
Sarawak	27	1				28					
<i>Total</i>	199	12	6	1	1	219	453	16	35	1	505

SOURCE: Authors' calculation based on *His Majesty's Government Gazette* (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2004), 48:8, April 12, 2004.

*Originally, the BN was declared to have won eight and PAS six of the parliamentary seats in Kelantan. However, on June 23, 2004, the Kelantan High Court reversed one election result in the Pasir Puteh constituency on the grounds that the EC had declared the wrong winner for the constituency.

PAS, which campaigned on the platforms “Islam for All” and “Power with the Ulama” (Muslim religious scholars), suffered a crushing defeat. The party had 26 members in the old 193-member parliament; now it has only seven in the enlarged 219-seat Dewan Rakyat. Both the president and secretary-general of PAS lost the parliamentary seats they contested. Worse still, PAS lost control of the state government in rural Terengganu. In Kelantan, PAS’s impregnable stronghold, early unofficial results gave the impression that BN would form the state government. In the event, after recounts, PAS won 24 of 45 seats, one with a mere two-vote majority, and formed the government. Nationally, PAS garnered 1,075,517 votes or 15.01% of votes cast, almost identical with the 15% it polled in 1999. In Kedah, where it was hoping to expand its influence, PAS managed only five state seats as against 12 won in 1999. The losses PAS suffered in the 2004 election showed that its 1999 gain stemmed

TABLE 2 *Percentage of Votes by Political Parties in the Parliamentary Election*

<i>State</i>	<i>Voters</i>	<i>BN</i>	<i>PAS</i>	<i>ADIL</i>	<i>DAP</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Ind.</i>	<i>Turnout</i>
Perlis	112,482	62.16	35.39					83.22
Kedah	821,901	58.43	27.77	11.58				80.99
Kelantan	662,722	49.02	37.42	9.87			1.16	80.40
Terengganu	455,924	55.21	37.43	5.15				87.93
Penang	672,362	55.57	3.74	12.01	26.43			76.04
Perak	1,170,351	57.17	13.63	7.88	17.29			70.08
Pahang	570,106	65.67	20.23	5.32	5.75			76.20
Selangor	1,422,274	63.96	13.87	12.61	6.81		0.35	72.95
FT KL	670,920	57.27	4.10	12.19	24.73	0.24	0.03	69.75
FT P/Jaya	5,079	87.64		11.58				91.79
N Sembilan	429,786	67.16	9.83	6.18	12.92			73.36
Melaka	345,917	69.23	5.74	7.63	14.05			78.94
Johor	1,184,788	77.14	9.35	3.67	6.77			73.51
FT Labuan	22,006	75.11	21.58					67.08
Sabah	512,490	62.08		11.38	2.57	0.33	19.30	65.03
Sarawak	695,969	64.61	0.24	1.25	15.67	8.07	8.23	62.03
<i>Total</i>	<i>9,755,077</i>	<i>62.05</i>	<i>15.01</i>	<i>8.37</i>	<i>9.74</i>	<i>0.53</i>	<i>1.52</i>	<i>73.92</i>

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 1.

NOTE: Column "Others" includes MDP, SETIA, PASOK (Persatuan Kebangsaan Pasok Nunukragang Bersatu, United Pasok Nunukragang National Organization), SNAP, and STAR. Table 2 excludes the 2.29% of rejected and 0.49% of unreturned votes.

largely from Malay dissatisfaction caused by the Anwar Ibrahim crisis and not from PAS's emphasis on *hudud*.

The PAS debacle in 2004 was attributable to the party's aggressive style of wooing voters by pushing for an Islamic state agenda with what many saw as an undue emphasis on *hudud* and by branding an anti-PAS vote as an act of apostasy. PAS is probably suffering from role confusion. It is a political party with the professed aim of capturing power but it is acting like a religious organization interested in the invigoration of religious faith and re-creation of an Islamic state. Apparently, many Malays do not endorse the kind of Islamic state advocated by PAS. Most Malays are interested in policies aimed at realizing social justice, eradicating poverty, promoting virtue, and prohibiting vice in their society. To win elections, parties must, in addition to promising spiritual welfare, serve the voters' interest.

DAP, which was routed in the 1999 elections, improved its performance with the reelection of party chairman Lim Kit Siang and his deputy, Karpal Singh. Lim's daughter-in-law also retained the state seat vacated by her husband,

Lim Guan Eng, who could not contest. Former head of DAP Socialist Youth (DAPSY), he was imprisoned from August 1998 to August 1999 under the Sedition Act and Printing Presses and Publications Act for allegedly making false accusations against the then-chief minister of Melaka, incriminating the latter in statutory rape. Under Malaysian law, convicted criminals cannot run for political office within five years of their release from prison. DAP won 12 parliamentary and 15 state seats and collected 694,575 votes, 9.78% of the total. DAP's best performance was in the state of Perak, where it won three parliamentary and seven state seats. The party's decision to break away from the PAS-led opposition front (BA) and distance itself from PAS and its Islamic state ideology seems to have helped PAS to perform relatively better in Penang and Perak. The success is also partly attributable to the DAP's "soft approach" of pleading with voters to give it a chance so the party could ensure checks and balances in government and make sure that the prime minister's anti-corruption and development programs do not falter.²⁶

KeADILan, the torchbearer of secular democratic governance, won only one seat, securing 587,776 votes or 8.27% of the popular vote. In 1999, it had secured a very respectable 11.54%. In 2004, following five recounts, KeADILan president Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who was declared to have lost in the first count, retained her seat with a majority of only 590 votes; the final count was done with a ring of police deployed around the counting center. All of the party's remaining 58 candidates lost. KeADILan's poor performance derived also from the fact that Abdullah Badawi has shown seriousness in implementing policies advocated by KeADILan such as fighting corruption and crime and providing greater social security. The opposition's performance is yet another indicator of several important trends: withering support for the "Islamic State" concept, paralysis of the *reformasi* (reform) movement that had led to the formation of KeADILan, and fading support for Anwar Ibrahim.

The opposition parties believe that they would have won many more seats had the 2004 elections been free and fair in terms of equal access to the media, use of governmental resources, and impartial election administration. The opposition newspaper *Harakah* described the poll as the "weirdest, dirtiest and most undemocratic of all elections held in Malaysia since independence."²⁷ Lim Kit Siang, DAP's chairman, told reporters, "I call on Abdul Rashid [the EC chairman] to resign with dignity because the conduct of this general election is the worst in the history of the country's democratic system."²⁸ Among the

26. The DAP deputy chairman said: "There is no doubt that the Barisan Nasional will form the Government, but we are going along the lines that DAP should be a strong opposition to ensure check and balance." See *ibid.*, March 18, 2004.

27. *Harakah*, April 16–30, 2004.

28. *New Straits Times*, March 22, 2004.

problems reported were the absence of voters' names from some electoral rolls; the existence of "phantom" or unqualified voters; a two-hour extension of the voting period in Selangor; misassignment of a party logo on the ballot paper in one state constituency in Pahang, which led to re-polling; and the wrongful switch of ballot papers in two state constituencies in Melaka. The process of recounting votes was also noticeably slow because of new election rules.

The problem in Selangor stemmed from a delayed start—to 3 P.M.—to voting in some areas. To compensate, the EC extended the voting period for two hours in the state. The EC chairman took the blame for the glitch but maintained that the election's problems were ones of implementation, not deliberate policies. In reaction PAS and KeADILan jointly lodged a preliminary complaint with the Human Rights Commission over what they asserted were irregularities: the existence of two separate electoral rolls, which confused voters and candidates; repetition of voter names at different polling stations; removal of names from the electoral rolls; and delays in handing over the electoral roll to opposition parties for checking. The opposition parties called on the EC to suspend the publication of election results until investigations into the alleged irregularities were carried out. Opposition officials submitted a memorandum urging the king and state rulers not to assent to the formation of the federal and state governments, especially in Terengganu, which was governed by PAS. They also called for fresh elections to be held and handled by a truly independent election commission.²⁹

The Badawi Factor

One reason cited for the success of BN is the personality of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, known as "the Badawi factor." According to BN's secretary-general, success in the election was "99.9% due to Abdullah Badawi."³⁰ The prime minister, aged 63, was born into a prominent family in the northern state of Penang. After taking a degree in Islamic studies and a period working in the civil service, he entered politics upon his father's death and was elected to Parliament in 1978. He quickly rose to prominence, holding the jobs of minister of education and defense before being appointed foreign minister in 1991. In 1999, he was made deputy prime minister after his predecessor, Anwar Ibrahim, was sacked.

Most observers of Malaysian government and politics concur that since he became prime minister, Abdullah Badawi has endeared himself to the public through words and actions. He has addressed the festering issue of graft with high-profile prosecutions. Eric Chia, a multimillionaire, was arrested and charged

29. *Star*, March 24, 2004; *Harakah*, April 16–30, 2004.

30. *Star*, March 22, 2004.

with criminal breach of trust amounting to RM 76.4 million (\$20.3 million) while he was head of Perwaja Steel Bhd. (As of this writing, the case was continuing.) Land and Cooperation Minister Kasitah Gaddam was charged with corruption involving RM 3.6 million (\$900,000) and subsequently resigned.

Abdullah also rekindled some faith in the police through the establishment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the police force. For the past decade, the force has come under heavy criticism for its lack of transparency, excessive use of force, ill-treatment of suspects and detainees, and high levels of corruption. Several high-ranking policemen are known to have been involved with the criminal underworld. The commission consists of members from the government, civil society, and opposition party representatives. The prime minister's appointments of a new inspector-general of police and his deputy were also well received. Abdullah has made anti-corruption a pillar of his administration: in a speech to elite civil servants, he named combating corruption and red tape as his priorities. His surprise visit to an immigration center in Kuala Lumpur to check on this notoriously slow department created the impression that he is also serious about inefficiency. He has worked to improve public delivery systems, cutting red tape and increasing efficiency in the public sector, applying prudent fiscal management by canceling high-cost projects, and boosting the agricultural sector to create more sources of wealth.

Polls conducted a week prior to the 2004 election indicate that people were generally pleased with the arrest of high-profile individuals and others on charges of corruption. There has been neither a personal attack on any opposition leader nor abrasive confrontation with any group by Abdullah and BN leaders during the election period. A survey conducted after the elections by the independent Merdeka Center for Opinion Research found that 42% of 1,017 respondents voted for BN because of its promise for material development. The survey also found that "32 percent of the respondents chose to describe [Abdullah] as a 'man of the people' while 22 percent described him as having a 'clean image.' Another 19 percent saw him in the context of his religious background."³¹

Faced with a prime minister with equally strong Islamic credentials and greater acceptability among Malaysians, the opposition PAS resorted to personal attacks on Abdullah and his family. Members accused Abdullah of preaching Islamic virtue only when it suited him and criticized him for not leading funeral rites for his mother. *Harakah*, similarly attacked Abdullah and his family and mocked Abdullah's Islamic credentials, especially for not leading his mother's funeral prayer. It also tried to revive the groundswell of public opinion regarding the Anwar issue by showing pictures of Anwar Ibrahim's black eye and his

31. Pauline Puah, "Survey Confirms 'Pak Lah Factor' in BN Polls Victory," in <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>, accessed September 19, 2004.

wife and daughters on the campaign trail.³² PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang was much more aggressive toward Abdullah and the UMNO leadership, accusing them of paying lip service to Islam. Hadi's strident condemnation of Abdullah did not find favor with Malaysians at large and adversely affected Hadi's and PAS's public image. After the first few days, Hadi changed his tone and focused on accusing the BN government of abuses, injustice in relation to Anwar, and other issues, but it was too late.

In contrast, Abdullah adopted a non-confrontational approach that was attuned to Malaysia's political culture. His appeal to the country had been "trust me" rather than "trust my government." His campaign themes have been promises to curb corruption and lead Malaysia toward "Excellence, Glory, and Distinction." His religious credibility—seen as genuine by many—also neutralized Anwar's carefully cultivated image as a modern Muslim leader, a champion of the Islamic and developing world.

The Buoyant Economy

BN's win was also partly attributable to the buoyant Malaysian economy, which has recorded impressive growth since 1999. In 2003, the economy performed surprisingly well despite the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in the middle of the year. Inflation remained relatively low at 1.2% and the unemployment rate stands at about 3.8%. The manufacturing sector registered the strongest growth at 6.5%, followed by mining (4.5%) and services (4.2%).³³

Prime Minister Abdullah has continued most of his predecessor's economic policies. One obvious divergence was Abdullah's plan to improve the agricultural sector as one of the engines of economic growth. In a small cabinet reshuffle after becoming prime minister, Abdullah appointed Nor Muhammad Yaakob, then economic advisor to the government, as his second finance minister. Abdullah himself is the finance minister. Nor Yaakob was credited for implementing unorthodox economic policies such as currency and capital controls as responses to the Asian financial crisis that hit Malaysia in 1997–98.

Several economic indicators work in the government's—and thus the ruling party's—favor. On February 25, 2004, Bank Negara (the central bank) announced Malaysia's economic performance for 2003 in which the gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 5.2%, better than the government's initial forecast of 4.5%.³⁴

32. While in police custody in 1998, Anwar was beaten by Inspector General of Police Abdul Rahim Noor, who later confessed, was convicted by a court, and apologized as demanded by Anwar Ibrahim. The image of Anwar's black eye became the symbol of *reformasi* in 1999.

33. "Budget 2004: Building on Success, Investing for the Future," <http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Saturday/Columns/200309130952/Artic>, accessed March 18, 2004.

34. *Star*, February 26, 2004.

This growth was founded on higher consumer spending, soaring exports fueled by the manufacturing sector, and stronger growth in investments. In addition to boasting the best GDP growth since the financial crisis, Malaysia also recorded impressive gains on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange composite index. On March 18, 2004, the composite index breached the 900-point mark to close at 901.47, the highest close in four years. A day later, the last market trading day before the elections, the index closed at 904.45. This impressive gain, though quite normal before Malaysia's general elections, indicated investors' confidence in the government's economic policies.

The 3Ms

Indeed, BN has also benefited considerably from the old 3Ms: money, machinery, and media. BN has a lot of money that its candidates have spent without limits. The opposition, all along, has been accusing BN of buying votes. The ruling BN has used its resources for electoral advantage, often employing the BN machinery to keep the voters in a "feel good" mode. All over the country, roads were resurfaced. Schools, communities, and individuals received grants, awards, and assistance. No such advantages of the politics of "feel good" accrued to the opposition.

Moreover, BN's electoral machinery is generally superior to that of the opposition. With the even shorter campaign period, this advantage became decisive. What observers of government and politics in Malaysia have often ignored is that BN is a coalition of 14 political parties and therefore BN campaigns are carried out by 14 parties under the same label.

The most decisive of the three factors is BN's control of the media. In recent years, the Malaysian Chinese Association, one of the key players in the coalition, has secured direct control of the newspapers *Nanyang Siang Pao* and *China Press*, making BN's control of the broadcast and daily print media complete. The Merdeka Center survey found that nearly two-thirds of 1,017 respondents viewed media coverage during the elections as being biased in favor of the ruling party. Forty-five percent of respondents reported that they were influenced by the mass media.³⁵ By contrast, the opposition only publishes its bimonthly party papers, which cannot legally be sold to non-members. However, this law is not strictly enforced. Opposition parties argue that the governing coalition's control over the media and other instruments of power is unfair. The BN-owned or -controlled mass media have systematically projected PAS as being discriminatory toward women, fixated with segregation of the sexes, and desirous of curbing so-called un-Islamic forms of dress and

35. Pauline Puah, "Survey: Media Coverage of Elections Slanted," in <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>, accessed September 21, 2004.

entertainment. During the eight-day campaign, BN bombarded the electorate with approximately 1,000 pages of full-page advertisements. In contrast, newspapers refused to run all but a few of the opposition advertisements, and even then these were heavily edited.

Fractured Opposition

A final factor that contributed to BN's landslide is the weakness of the opposition. The BA that performed well during the 1999 elections could not continue to work as a team. PAS suffered from the death in June 2002 of its leader Fadzil Noor, a close friend and comrade of Anwar Ibrahim. Fadzil Noor was instrumental in bringing PAS and KeADILan together. He was succeeded by Abdul Hadi Awang, who shares little with Anwar Ibrahim or his cause. Consequently, the once-highly publicized cordiality between PAS and KeADILan gradually waned. Barely months after the 1999 elections, DAP parted acrimoniously with PAS, unwilling to accept the latter's insistence on establishing an Islamic state in Malaysia. The withdrawal of DAP from BA and the unnecessary, acrimonious public negotiations only made things worse. The BN-controlled media have been quick to take advantage of the opposition's weaknesses. DAP also became estranged from KeADILan, accusing the party of trying to impose its will on DAP members. In several constituencies, DAP and KeADILan fielded candidates opposing each other.

KeADILan, once considered a viable alternative to UMNO, was suffering from financial difficulties and mass defections. A total of 130 members, including state and divisional leaders, crossed over to UMNO in December 2003 and February 2004 as the party's president admitted to the organization's financial difficulties. KeADILan received a jolt when three of its senior leaders were ruled ineligible for the general election. Article 48 of the Federal Constitution bars from running those who have been sentenced to one year or more in jail or who have been fined at least RM 2,000 (\$530). Invoking the article, the EC disqualified the vice president, youth chief, and deputy women's chief because of their criminal convictions.³⁶ The close relationship between PAS and KeADILan also suffered because of squabbling over seats.

In contrast, the 14-member BN maintained a multiethnic front and appeared united. Many of its intra-party squabbles have been resolved, at least temporarily. The relatively smooth transition from Dr. Mahathir to Abdullah Badawi has also enhanced the image of the ruling coalition in the eyes of the Malaysian public.

36. *Star*, March 5, 2004. These convictions were mainly political: the vice president was convicted of making false declarations relating to Anwar's case, the youth chief for his exposure of official government documents implicating a minister in corruption, and the women's deputy chief for making alleged false statements on the government's mistreatment of illegal immigrants.

Finally, the opposition, specifically PAS, also suffered because of the September 11, 2001, incident, which was followed by the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and later Iraq, and several incidents of bombings by Islamic radicals in Southeast Asia. As a result of these developments, further anxieties have developed, especially among non-Muslims, about political Islam. The dramatic change in the international political climate, the hype over terrorism, and the loss of lives in the Southeast Asia bombings have adversely affected opposition politics in Malaysia. The result has been heightened fear of PAS's intentions among some Malaysians, particularly non-Muslims. The anxieties have persisted because PAS, instead of adopting and publicizing its developmental policies, has focused its attention on introducing *hudud* and *qisas* [retaliatory] laws and Islamic rule generally in Terengganu. The sudden death of PAS leader Fadzil Noor, popularly regarded as more approachable and open-minded, and his replacement by Abdul Hadi Awang, considered more aloof, combative, and close-minded, reinforced these negative impressions of PAS.³⁷

Conclusion

The eleventh general elections in Malaysia once again demonstrated the strength of BN in the electoral arena. It won a nine-tenths majority in parliament, recaptured the state of Terengganu, and made significant inroads in Kelantan, the Malay heartland in the northeast. The polls were conducted relatively smoothly. However, the elections were also lopsided, in the sense that the media—television and radio—and the press as represented by the leading national dailies played a totally partisan role. The major media outlets, controlled by BN partners, gave pro-BN, anti-BA messages. The opposition received scant if any mention. There were also serious allegations of vote-buying, corruption, and vote-rigging. A comprehensive reform program will be necessary to combat all allegations of malpractice before democracy in Malaysia can be considered stable.

In the meantime, the 2004 elections demonstrate that Abdullah Badawi had proven himself. His fight against corruption; insistence on public accountability; and shift from corporate mega-projects to emphasis on agro-based, rural projects, as well as his moderate Islamic stance and inclusive multiracial approach went down very well with every community of the Malaysian electorate—and that support translated into votes. A number of factors were in Badawi's favor, including the rapid growth of the economy and the fractured opposition. PAS lost its control of Terengganu state and was severely weakened in Kelantan; its

37. Hadi Awang claimed that the United States was protecting Abdullah because it feared PAS coming to power and that the U.S. "will never allow the establishment of an Islamic government anywhere." See *Harakah*, March 16–31, 2004.

advocacy of, and attempts at, establishing an Islamic state has been seriously undermined.

Some opposition leaders have alleged that irregularities in the elections, as well as redrawing of electoral boundaries to BN's benefit, contributed to the opposition defeat. They also accused the weak EC for its inability to curb rampant violations of election laws. An investigation and rectification of alleged irregularities would certainly revive people's confidence in Malaysian democracy. Following the EC's publication of elections totals, 40 petitions were filed by various parties to challenge the results. Of all the petitions, only a result in the parliamentary seat in Kelantan was overturned, where BN was declared the winner following an apparent mistake by the EC. Accordingly, BN's parliamentary seats increased to 199, while PAS's were reduced to just six. All other petitions in Kelantan and nine petitions in Terengganu were rejected by the respective state courts.

In sum, the 2004 general elections were an endorsement of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's style of moderate governance. These were his first elections as prime minister, conducted after he had been in office for only four months and 21 days. Abdullah was Barisan's selling point. He managed to recapture most Malay constituencies won by PAS and KeADILan in 1999. He asked for, and received, a big mandate: the swing to the government represents a personal vote of confidence in Abdullah and an endorsement of his vision of Malaysia's future.