

A VOTE for change against all odds

SINCE MALAYSIA GAINED INDEPENDENCE FROM Britain in 1957, its politics have been dominated by Barisan Nasional, a coalition that includes three large political parties representing the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Najib Razak, the leader of the party and Prime Minister, had survived international criticism about his alleged role in the corruption scandal around the state-owned investment fund 1MDB. His re-election seemed assured.

Then May 9 2018 happened. The opposition party led by Dr. Mahathir Mohamad defeated Barisan Nasional in a peaceful and historic process of democracy in action. Euphoria spread across Malaysia. A public holiday was declared and social media was ripe with the celebrations of jubilant voters.

The victory defied predictions. Dr. M., who had served as Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003, was a retired politician in his tenth decade of life. He celebrated his 93rd birthday on July 10, making him the oldest-serving state leader in the world.

Past elections had favored the status quo and the same outcome seemed likely this time. The incumbent government reportedly had improved its odds through gerrymandering, racial politics, dirty tactics disqualifying votes and pressure on individuals and organizations. One of the most popular ambassadors for Malaysia, AirAsia, had publicly supported the incumbent. Its founder, CEO Tony Fernandez, later released a video apologizing to Malaysians.

As a Malaysian native, I learned a powerful lesson a month later, from Marina Mahathir, the eldest daughter of Dr. M. What changed the outcome of the elections was what she called “the citizen initiative.” It was a simple campaign devised by the opposition team to persuade citizens, one at a time, that it would actually be possible to oust a party that had been in power for 61 years. Skepticism was deep among voters; in the previous election, the ruling party had held on to power even despite losing the popular vote.

Through that effort, the impossible became possible. Building on a common belief that change was finally needed in government, an effective campaign educated people about their actions and what they could do. This simple movement mobilized an avalanche of action by individuals and organizations.

A simple grassroots campaign caught fire, ousted Malaysia’s entrenched ruling party and unified the nation, says Brunswick’s SUSAN HO.

In Petaling Jaya, a suburb of the capital city Kuala Lumpur, a pastor encouraged his congregation to exercise their rights. Elsewhere other local religious leaders did the same. Volunteers held sessions to educate citizens about voting, whatever their choice. As the ruling party exploited racial and religious divides, the opposition put aside differences.

Car pools were organized to share transport with those returning to their voting constituencies, and strangers became friends. Airlines offered discounted rates and provided additional flights for citizens returning to vote. Some companies gave days off to employees who had to travel.

Even my 80-year-old mother and elderly relatives turned out to vote! Turnout reached about 82 percent – compared with about 56 percent in the 2016 US presidential election. PACAs (polling agents and counting agents) were mobilized at different voting stations during Election Day to ensure the right process was followed by government officials.

Weeks later, those who voted proudly displayed fingers still discolored from electoral ink. No amount of soap could wash off the indelible mark of a vote that counted. One by one, they had planted a seed of hope for a “new” Malaysia. ♦



Supporters await the swearing in of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad on May 10, the day after his election as Prime Minister. At right, the 92-year-old victor Dr. Mohamad addresses a press conference the same day.

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