

## Framing of the 2008 Malaysian General Election Results by the English Language Press

Pembingkaian Keputusan Pilihan Raya Umum Malaysia 2008 oleh Akhbar Bahasa Inggeris

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### ABSTRAK

*Keputusan Pilihan Raya Umum 2008 telah digelar sebagai 'tsunami politik' oleh pelbagai pihak. Dalam pilihan raya tersebut Barisan Nasional (BN) telah kehilangan majoriti simbolik dua-pertiga Parlimen. Dalam pada itu, parti-parti pembangkang secara kolektifnya berjaya mengawal dewan undangan negeri di lima buah negeri. Pada masa lalu, pilihan raya di Malaysia menjadi satu urusan yang terjangka dengan adanya capaian mudah BN kepada media, wang dan jentera kerajaan. Media cetak Malaysia memberi liputan positif dan menyeluruh kepada Barisan Nasional dalam tempoh sebelum hari mengundi. Bagaimana pula media cetak menjelaskan dan mentafsir keputusan pilihan raya yang tidak terjangka ini – teruk kepada BN mengikut piawaian politik Malaysia? Makalah ini membincangkan bagaimana media membingkaikan keputusan pilihan raya, faktor yang membawa kepada keputusan tersebut, serta mencari makna kepada persekitaran politik Malaysia. Kajian ini penting kerana media massa memainkan peranan penting dalam menentukan kerangka rujukan yang digunakan oleh pembaca untuk menafsirkan sesuatu kejadian atau isu. Makalah ini membincang pemingkaian keputusan Pilihan Raya Umum 2008 oleh akhbar bahasa Inggeris. Kutipan data melibatkan tiga akhbar bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia dengan analisis ke atas berita dan komentar, termasuk berita, rencana, lidah pengarang dan surat kepada editor dari hari mengundi pada 8hb Mac sehingga kepada hari pembentukan Kabinet baru Malaysia.*

*Kata kunci: Malaysia, Pilihan Raya Umum, 2008, akhbar bahasa Inggeris, pemingkaian*

### ABSTRACT

*Various observers heralded the 2008 Malaysian General Election as the 'political tsunami'. The ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) lost the symbolic two-third control of the Parliament. The Opposition collectively controls the state legislature of five states. In the past, general elections in Malaysia have become a predictable affair with the BN's greater access to the media, money and governmental machinery. With the glowing pre-election coverage on the ruling coalition by the press, how then does the press make sense of the election result – devastating for the ruling coalition by Malaysian standard? How would the print media response and interpret such unexpected result? This article explores media framing of the results, factors and the meaning of it in Malaysian political landscape. This study is important because mass media plays an important role in setting frames of reference that readers use to interpret events or issues. This article explores the framing of the 2008 Malaysian General Election results by the English language press. Data collection focused on three Malaysian English language newspapers with analysis on the news and commentaries including news stories and features, editorials and letters to the editor, from the Election Day on 8<sup>th</sup> March to the formation of the new Malaysian Cabinet.*

*Keywords: Malaysia, General Election, 2008, English language newspapers, framing*

### INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the result of the 12th Malaysian General Election on March 8, 2008. Observers generally have different takes on the cause of the dissatisfaction of voters as well as different predictions of the final result even though they could agree on one thing – no one had ever expected the final result. In the introduction of *Tipping Points: Viewpoints on the Reasons*

*for and Impact of the March 8 Election Earthquake* (2008), Yeoh – who edited the book – wrote that not only no one expected such result, some even told him that "... they never expected to see this kind of thing happening in their lifetime..." Yeoh also called the historic 12th General Election "... the ultimate rock concert of our generation that no one will ever forget..."

The opposition Islamic party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) retained Kelantan, and together with other opposition

parties like Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party or PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) managed to form state governments in Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor. The Opposition also managed to win 10 out of 11 parliamentary seats in the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur. More importantly, collectively, they managed to deny the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) government the two-third majority of the Parliament – a traditional symbolic sign of BN invincibility in Malaysia.

The last time this happened in Malaysia in 1969, the country had to go through a period of post-election political crisis that resulted in bloody riots and the suspension of the Parliament. Sweeping social, economic and political changes were introduced, with the most significant being the New Economic Policy (NEP).

The 2008 General Election was the second general election held under the Abdullah administration, and the twelfth held since 1955. As a parliamentary democracy, elections are held every five years in Malaysia to elect the Members of Parliament (MPs), which form the Federal Government, as well as state assemblymen, which form the State Government of the 13 states in Malaysia.

This article discusses the framing of the 12th Malaysian General Election results by the Malaysian English-language press through their news and commentary articles published from 9<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> March 2008. This is the period between the announcements of the General Election results to the announcement of the new Cabinet by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and which marked the beginning of a new administration in Malaysia. As this paper explores the period of uncertainty, any inclusion of data after the establishment of the new administration might skew the result of the research as by then, certain patterns and arrangements would have emerged.

Three mainstream English-language press – *The Star*, *The Sun* and *New Straits Times* – were chosen for this study. English-language press was selected for the study because of the assumption that readers of these papers comprise the middle and upper classes that cut across ethnic groups. Their reactions and responses would be partly influenced by the reporting by these papers.

The discussion would be divided into three main parts. The first part would explore the framing of general election results by the English-language press. The second part would analyse the framing by the English-language press on the reasons that lead to the *political tsunami*. The final part of this article would examine the framing used by the English-language press in predicting what these results mean for Malaysia. The political economy of Malaysian media in general, and Malaysian press in particular, were already much discussed and explored elsewhere (see for example, Hilley 2001; Mohd Safar Hasim 1996; Mustafa Kamal Anuar 2000; Mustafa Kamal Anuar 2002; Adnan Hussein & Chai Ming Hock 2008)

and this article would only briefly outline the nature of the Malaysian press. Suffice to note here that all mainstream media – print, broadcast and electronic – were somehow linked to the ruling government or political parties and individuals. *New Straits Times* is linked to UMNO, *The Star* is owned by MCA through Huaren Holdings and *The Sun* is owned by Vincent Tan after he bought it over from Nexnews Berhad and renamed the company as Berjaya Media (Kee 2008: 271). Vincent Tan who is a businessman has a cordial relationship with UMNO politicians. Besides ownership, Malaysian media were also constrained by legislations directly controlling the press like the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, as well as legislations with indirect implications on the press like the Official Secret Act (OSA) 1972 and the Internal Security Act (ISA) 1960.

Prior to the General Election, local media, including the English-language press, gave a generally positive coverage to the Barisan Nasional's contribution to Malaysia and highlighted remarkable social and economic statistics. As remarked by *The Star* Deputy News Editor, M. Veera Pandiyan (2008: N51, N52) these positive spins "... are no longer working like they used to ..." and that "... the side with the biggest and loudest propaganda machinery doesn't necessarily win the war ..."

Many political parties claim they were 'shocked' by the results. Despite independent public opinion surveys commissioned well before polling day, many did not expect to be hit by the 'political tsunami'. Merdeka Center programme director Ibrahim Suffian defended the survey methods and stressed that they have given them "... the exact results of the surveys but it depends on how the parties looked at the results ..." (Selvarani & Tan 2008: 23). Ibrahim pointed out that some parties "... only saw and read what they wanted to hear ..." Meanwhile, International Islamic University's Electoral Studies Unit chief Professor Syed Arabi Idid was reported as saying that the "... BN didn't pay attention to the results of the polls because they did not give good marks to them ..."

The most noticeable change in the post-election period is the way mainstream English-language press covers political news (Yeoh 2008b: 254). Yeoh noted that "... Opposition figures get as much coverage as government officials ..." and that "... columnists are now more critical ..." The 'blatant spin' designed to make anything the government does look good is also missing. Zaharom Nain (2008: 259) observed that the post-election coverage "... appears to be more balanced and less demonizing ..."

Prior to the general election, many people assumed that the new media would have limited impact because the Internet penetration rate is still low. However, Yeoh (2008: 256) pointed out that the assumption 'vastly underestimated' the secondary access.

## WHAT HAPPENED?

The reporting of this aspect by the media were straightforward, parroting what the politicians said, and given it being a political event, politicians' views were given prominence in the news coverage. This is a period just after the General Election, and relationships cultivated between media practitioners and politicians are still routinised as a non-conflict interaction and that politicians still exercised great power over journalists.

As anything less than two-thirds majority in Parliament is considered a debacle in Malaysia, *The Star* reported the day after the General Election that the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition "... suffered some of the greatest defeats in its history ..." (Political tsunami 2008: N1), but highlighted statement by the Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that this was "... clear proof of democracy at work in the country ..." (Barisan reels from 2008: N3). According to *The Star*, BN's losses are "... even bigger than what the ruling coalition party experienced in the 1969 general election ..." PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail described the result as "... the people's victory ..." (Barisan routed as 2008: N3).

In the aftermath of the election result, *The Star* also described Malaysia as being 'in shock' (Barisan reels from 2008: N3) without explaining why Malaysians should be shocked in the first place. According to *New Straits Times*, the General Election results "... delivered a swinging rebuke to whatever complacency may have remained in Barisan Nasional ..." (The electorate has 2008: 2). Gua Musang Member of Parliament Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah said BN and UMNO is facing a *historic crisis* and that Malaysia is in a *period of uncertainty* because BN and UMNO's legitimacy and strength is 'now in question' (Begin process of 2008: 6). *The Sun* described the result as 'BN's worst defeat' (BN's worst defeat 2008: 3), and that the results were a "... huge blow to its morale ...".

## 2008 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS - NATIONAL LEVEL

The first sign of "... massive setbacks for the Barisan Nasional came at around 6pm ..." as noted by *The Star's* Wong Chun Wai when he received SMS from Lembah Pantai MP Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, suggesting that she was going to lose her seat to PKR's Nurul Izzah Anwar (Wong 2008: N12). It was a result that "... stunned Barisan leaders and the media ..." Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir described the result as 'shocking' (Ritikos 2008: N12). He was quoted as saying that he "... expected Barisan to lose support but not this badly ..." As the BN was so used to their two-thirds majority control of Parliament, anything less than that 'is considered a debacle' (Weiss 2008: 2).

## 2008 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS - STATE LEVEL

By 8.00 pm on the election result night, there were already unconfirmed reports that PAS has retained Kelantan. PAS managed to win 38 out of 45 state seats (almost a clean 2008: N19). PKR won one state seat. Kelantan Menteri Besar Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat was reported as describing PAS victory in Kelantan as "... more like a tsunami rather than a revolution ..." (Simon et al. 2008: 7).

By 9.00 pm, it was confirmed that DAP defeated BN in Penang. This came as a shock to both BN and the Opposition as "... Penangites had thrown 90 percent support behind [BN] in the 2004 polls ..." (Barisan routed as 2008: N3). Gerakan's Dr Koh Tsu Koon described the result as 'totally unexpected' (William & Liew 2008: 4). Dr Koh said Gerakan "... did not expect such a big swing of voters in favour of the Opposition ..." (Chin 2008: N3). The DAP "... only expected to deny the Barisan of a two-thirds majority ..." (Barisan routed as 2008: N3). However, NST editorialised in an article, describing BN's loss in Penang as 'not unexpected' (Sharanjit & Emmanuel 2008: 4). This is in contrast to the pre-election coverage by NST on Penang that were generally positive. *The Star* Joceline Tan (2008b: N11) describe the result as "... a sudden and stunning end to almost 40 years of Barisan rule ..." in Penang.

Selangor followed when by about 10.30 pm PKR, DAP and PAS managed to defeat BN there. The Opposition swept 35 of the 56 state seats, two short of a two-thirds majority (Opposition captures Selangor 2008: N14). *The Sun* described the lost of Selangor as a 'nightmare' for out-going Selangor Menteri Besar Dr Mohd Khir Toyo as his efforts to "... wipe out the Opposition in Selangor has fallen far from target ..." (Fernandez 2008: 8).

While it managed to keep Terengganu, BN lost Penang, Selangor, Kedah and Perak to the Opposition and failed to capture Kelantan (Barisan reels from 2008: N3). The announcement by the Election Commission that the DAP-PKR-PAS coalition had won in Perak only came at 4.30am (Moment of truth 2008: N6). Barisan Nasional also only managed to form state government with simple majority in Perlis, Pahang, Melaka, Negri Sembilan and Terengganu (EC announces simple 2008: N4).

The Opposition also managed to 'capture' 10 of the 13 parliamentary seats in the Federal Territories (Opposition MPs 'rule' 2008: N8). The general election also saw the shock defeats of some of the biggest personalities on the Malaysian political landscape.

It was only by 12.30 am the following morning that the Barisan had managed to secure a simple majority (Wong 2008: N12), with the formal announcement came at 1.30am by the Election Commission chairman Abdul Rashid that the Barisan Nasional coalition gained simple majority by winning 136 of the 222 parliamentary seats contested (EC announces simple 2008: N4). The final total parliamentary seats won by BN came to 140 seats (Pak Lah to 2008: N1).

## 2008 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS - POLITICAL PARTIES

Overall, Gerakan came out of this election worst. Most of their candidates lost and they also lost the control of Penang state government. MIC leadership was also in disarray as its top six leaders lost in the General Election, with "... its top leadership rejected by the voters ...". Except for Dr S. Subramaniam, S. Saravanan and K. Devamani, the other MIC candidates were all wiped out in an "... unprecedented wave of anger ..." (Kuppusamy 2008: N24). MIC president S. Samy Vellu "... nearly 30-year tenure in the cabinet came to a crushing end ..." (Masilamany 2008: 8) when he lost to PKR's Dr Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj.

MCA president Ong Ka Ting said "... MCA never imagined that it would fare so badly in the general election ..." and "... did not expect to lose so many seats ..." (Ong: We'll continue 2008: 8). MCA might be the biggest loser in the general election but Gerakan lost its "... crown jewel, Penang, the state it had ruled for 39 years ..." (Barisan reels from 2008: N3). Gerakan president Dr Koh Tsu Koon described it as the "... biggest defeat for the party since its formation 40 years ago ..." (Koh saddened by 2008: N4). The national Gerakan leadership had been defeated (Tan 2008: N10).

DAP is described as the 'biggest victor' in Penang when they, together with PKR and PAS managed to win 29 out of 40 state seats (Barisan routed as 2008: N3). Gerakan was completely wiped out in Penang.

## WHY IT HAPPENED?

Post-election coverage in the English-language press offered various reasons to explain the disastrous General Election results for the Barisan Nasional. This section would discuss the framing of reasons leading to the General Election result in the news and commentaries published in the English-language press.

As politicians are still dominant over the relations between source and media practitioners, their views were given prominence in the post-election coverage. However, this "... exercise of power over the interpretation of reality ..." (Philip Schlesinger 1972 as quoted in Gans 1979: 80) – as how Schlesinger define news – were somewhat challenged by the other sources as each party renegotiate its position in the new political climate. In that scenario, news reporting also gave prominence to more critical interpretations from other sources as noted in the following discussion.

## MESSAGE FROM THE PEOPLE

This framing could be seen as a friendly way of telling the Barisan Nasional that the people are still with them, and the election results is just a reminder from the people about their general displeasure. Generally, three

groups of people using this frame are politicians, media practitioners and 'experts', led by BN politicians.

Among politicians that used this frame are Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who took the results as "... messages from the people ..." when he spoke on the morning after the general election (Barisan can form 2008: N4). He also reiterated that stand a week later in an interview with Bernama TV. He said that the result represent the people's desire "... to state that they harboured dissatisfaction in the four years that [he] have been leading the government and, therefore, they wanted a change ..." (PM shares views 2008: N3).

Taking the cue from the BN leadership, MCA president Ong Ka Ting also reasoned that the results "... show the people have dissatisfactions ..." (Ka Ting: MCA 2008: N8). Ong Ka Chuan, Ong Ka Ting's brother and Member of Parliament for Tanjung Malim was quick to suggest that "... bread and butter issues seemed to be a major factor ..." (Ka Chuan thanks 2008: N8) and that Malaysians may "... buy the argument that corruption and government wastage led to the increase of prices ..." as suggested by the Opposition in their election campaigns.

PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim said that "... people have voted for change and they do not want the same type of representatives ..." (People have voted 2008: N21). DAP adviser Lim Kit Siang said the result reflect the desire of the people "... for a change in Malaysia ..." (Kit Siang: It's 2008: N8).

As the support for BN slipped "... among all ethnic communities ..." (Weiss 2008: 1), former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir summed up the whole thing when he said "... the fact that Indians, Chinese and Malays voted for the Opposition showed that it was not about racial politics but that on the whole, the people sent the same signal ..." (Ritikos 2008: N12). His statement implies that the old method of campaigning along ethnic lines would no longer appeal to voters.

Some issues are also universal and appeal to voters regardless of race. As former Minister for Energy, Water and Communication Dr Lim Keng Yaik also suggested that "... both the Malays and non-Malays were frustrated at the lack of transparency and the extent of corruption ..." (Sim & Wong 2008: N15), and the "... overwhelming votes that went to opposition parties showed that the people were angry with Barisan Nasional ..." (Keng Yaik: Address 2008: 12). Lim statement, though taking the cue from the BN chairman, was an angrier outburst of frustration to the general election results.

Voters might also support the Opposition out of protest against the ruling coalition in general, and UMNO in particular. This was suggested as part of the reason for the Opposition to gain ground in urban areas of Sabah. Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) president Yong Teck Lee and Sabah DAP election committee chairman Hiew King Chew suggested that the Opposition had gained much ground in these areas due to the high incidence of 'protest

votes' (Split in opposition 2008: N33). Yong was quoted in *The Star* as saying that "... the increased support for the Opposition was due more to protest votes rather than wanting a change of government ..."

Taking cue from their political master, NST editorialised that the general election results showed that "... the broad spectrum of dissatisfaction with the ruling order has been translated into an across-the-board shakedown of the national and state legislatures ..." (The electorate has 2008: 2). This statement is very much reflecting and replicating the sentiments of their political master.

*The Sun* also concurred when they also editorialised that the 'people have spoken' through the election results and that the election would be "... stands as a beacon light for the people to hold their elected government accountable if they feel that their trust has been violated ..." (Historic day for 2008: 16).

Terence Fernandez (2008: 8) of *The Sun* suggested that Barisan Nasional lost Selangor because "... the people have enough of the reports of abuse of power at the local council level, land-grabs by the well-connected, lack of transparency in spending taxpayers' monies and arbitrary and ill-researched reasons for raising assessment ..." This statement shifted the blame from the federal level to the ills of the state administration as PM Abdullah had enough on his plate.

*The Sun* political editor Zainon Ahmad (2008b: 3) wrote that the people wanted to show the government "... that they matter and are not a mere doormat ..." Eileen Ng (2008: 17) of *New Straits Times* noted that in Selangor "... a swell of dissatisfaction among the people over issue relating to the economy, education, race and religion, crime and corruption snowballed into protest votes ..." This view is also very much echoing what politicians had been saying.

Experts quoted in news or analysis articles published in the newspapers also use this framing. Asia Strategy and Leadership Institute (Asli) Centre for Public Policy Studies director Tricia Yeoh described it a 'punishment votes.' Lawyer Zaid Ibrahim proposed that the clear and overwhelming rejection of Barisan Nasional represent a "... rejection of failed policies and actions of the BN government, accumulated from the past and the present ..." (Ahmad Fairuz Othman 2008: 12). As Johan Jaaffar (2008: 25) put it, the results reflect people's intention to "... punish the BN or to teach the coalition a lesson ..."

#### RACIAL REASONING

A scan of the article headlines within the Malaysian English papers showed that writers still use ethnic framing in their reporting and analysis despite acknowledgement by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that universal issues like "... rising costs of goods, crime and corruption were big issues that had come up during the election

..." (Barisan to conduct 2008: N3). This is typical in a situation when a certain frame was so dominant in news reporting for a long time. This contradiction was only expected as media and the public took their time to readjust to the new political environment.

Headlines like 'Chinese vent their frustration' (Chok 2008: 8) and 'Stronger Indian voice aids opposition' made their way into the paper the following day and this reflects the general understanding of journalists and newspapers when discussing issues in Malaysia. Discussions on Malaysian voters would generally be divided along ethnic lines, with the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities treated as separate entities, complete with 'presumed' differences in their political outlook and desire. This framing is used across the board by media practitioners, politicians and experts and reported in the news articles. The fact that the general election followed closely on massive protest by Hindraf – which were portrayed as a racist movement – add on to the tendency of making sense of the general election results from the racial angle.

*The Star* columnist Joceline Tan suggested that "... the Chinese had translated their political disenchantment into votes and Malay votes had swung in a number of parts to PKR ..." and that it was "... well known that the Chinese were not happy, but the Malay vote swing was not something that UMNO leaders had expected ..." (Tan 2008:N10). Tan also suggested that "... there had been rumblings on the Malay ground because they are greatly affected by cost-of-living issues but few thought they would cast their votes elsewhere ..."

Despite making assertions that "... it was a night when predictions, assumptions and stereotypes went flying out of the window ...", *The Star* columnist Joceline Tan (2008b: N11) still wrote an analysis along ethnic lines the following day. Her analysis were compartmentalised along the Chinese-Malay-Indian trinity. She asserts that the Chinese votes swing 'stunned everyone', but that the swing was not about punishing MCA, which in her opinion "... had done a credible job on many Chinese issues ..." Such statement could be expected from her, as *The Star* is owned by MCA's Huaren Holdings. She claims that the Chinese vote swing was "... to punish UMNO over issues ranging from the revival of the NEP to incidents of 'body snatching' ..." As to rub salt to the wound, she also attributed Gerakan's Dr Koh Tsu Koon "... less than sterling track record, the indecisiveness over the Chief Minister's post ..." as the reason for the Chinese voters swing. The MCA and Gerakan had a long history of rivalry over the post of Penang Chief Minister.

Joceline Tan also stereotyped the Indians as "... loyal bloc of Barisan votes ..." in the past, and presumed that the Indians also abandoned the BN coalition in the election. West coast Malays, Joceline Tan (2008b: N11) assumed, were "... conservative and moderate ...", and that they "... are not drawn to PAS the way their east

counterparts are ...” She presumes that the west coast Malays accept Anwar and PKR.

Media practitioners were not the only culprits in seeing everything in Malaysia from a racially tinted glass. Each community in Malaysia was also assumed to be homogenous. As suggested by *The Star*'s Wong Chun Wai (2008: N12), BN "... had focused its attention on the anti-establishment sentiments of the non-Malays but overlooked the mood of the Malay voters in some states ..." Wong (2008: N12) reasoned, "... while the non-Malays had their share of unhappiness, there were issues that cut across all races such as the cost of living, corruption, mismanagement and security ..."

NST even went as far as to suggest that the majority Chinese Penangites voted for Opposition because of UMNO's dominance in the state administration and Penang Chief Minister Dr Koh Tsu Koon "... seeming inability to counter it ..." (Sharanjit & Emmanuel 2008: 4).

Chok Suat Ling from NST 'identified' that it was "... a groundswell of discontent among Chinese voters ..." that sent MCA and Gerakan packing in many seats in the election (Chok 2008: 8). She estimated that the swing of 'about 20 percent' led to the fall of the Gerakan-led Penang government and the "... massive majorities garnered by DAP candidates ..." Chok (2008: 8) asserted that Malaysian Chinese were "... unhappy over several issues, notably the crime rate, hike in the price of goods, and what they perceived as the government's undelivered promises in efforts to combat corruption ...".

In another article, Chok Suat Ling (2008b: 10) implied that it was the "... massive Chinese and Indian vote swing that contributed to the decimation of the chiefs of the MIC, Gerakan and PPP in their seats ..." With the Malay community forming the majority in most constituencies, it would take a fair share of their vote swing in order to collectively reject Barisan Nasional candidates. Chok also described Malay support for Opposition in Kelantan and Kedah as 'surprising', but did not provide any reason for that.

The loss of MIC candidates in Bagan and Bagan Dalam state seats in Penang were also attributed to the swing of Indian votes to the Opposition (William & Liew 2008: 4) without highlighting the possibility that other community could be supporting Opposition too. The statement implied that the Indian community generally has the tendency to support MIC candidates in the past.

Terence Fernandez (2008: 8) of *The Sun* also reasoned along ethnic lines. He argues that MIC candidates lost in Selangor because there was "... lack of focus on Indian issues compounded by a string of temple demolitions by the state authorities ..." As for the Malay voters, Fernandez suggested "... many middle class [Malay] voters miffed with the high cost of living, while the Chinese voters were displeased over issues that touched on civil liberties ...".

In the post-election period, Malaysian English-language press was slow in adjusting to the changes on the ground. Analyses along ethnic lines were produced and published by writers, while comments that highlight reason that transcend ethnic lines were buried inside the paper. For example, DAP Wanita secretary Teresa Kok commented that the election result 'cuts across race' and that "... the people came forward to demand for changes ..." (Lim Kit Siang It's 2008: N8) were buried at the bottom of Page N8 in *The Star*, below the article that highlight MCA concerns that their effectiveness to represent the Chinese would be affected following the poor result of their candidates.

In another article published in *The Star*, argument that Malaysians did not vote along ethnic communal lines during the general election were only highlighted towards the end of the article. For example, in the news report on the post-election forum organised by *The Star*, Social Strategic Foundation executive director Dr Denison Jayasooria said that the 'political tsunami' "... could not happened with just the Chinese and Indian vote swing but also the sizable number of Malays who showed their displeasure against Barisan ..." (It's time BN 2008: N8). His comment only came towards the end of the article.

Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir also made the same reasoning when he said that "... Malays and UMNO members voted for the Opposition because they were affected by the high inflation, and despite the high economic growth figures announced by the government and the launch of development corridors, the people did not feel the benefits" (Ritikos 2008: N12).

In addition to having their own writers reasoning along ethnic line, media practitioners also quote 'expert' who shared similar views in their news and commentary articles. For example, NST published an article hinting that it was the swing of Indian votes that helped the Opposition won more mixed seats The article quoted Johan Saravanamuttu, a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) of Singapore as estimating that the Indians support "... swung by an estimated 60 to 80 percent ..." to the Opposition. Johan reasoned that the swing was caused by "... a sense of being marginalised, that the government did not care for their opinion or sentiments ...".

In another article published in *The Sun*, Universiti Utara Malaysia political science lecturer Associate Professor Dr Ariffin Omar were quoted as saying that "... the rising prices of goods and crime were the main reasons the Malays voted against the BN ..." (Puah 2008: 5). The article also quoted another lecturer from Monash University Sunway campus. Wong Chin Huat said that "... economy, crime and the loss of legitimacy in the BN government over such matters as the electoral process, judiciary and corruption are the pull and push factors of the Malay support for the Opposition ...".

*The Star* also published another commentary by Karim Raslan on the 12th General Election. Karim concluded that “people of all races – Malay, Chinese and Indian – have voted in record numbers to show their disappointment, frustration and anger at the Barisan” (Karim Raslan 2008: N27). Yet, he still argued his points along ethnic lines. Karim started off by suggesting that the “... Malaysian Indians have risen to become political kingmakers ...” as “... decades- old marginalisation and more recent attack such as temple demolitions have united them against the establishment ...” He then proposed that Malaysian Chinese also “... registered their frustrations over the arrogance and incompetence of some sections of the Barisan ...” over issues like “... NEP, the creeping pace of Islamisation and their utter alienation from the national life ...” Karim complete the ‘trinity’ by suggesting that the Malaysian Malays were angry “... over the rising cost of living ...” The specific reasons offered to explain each ethnic group’s “... disappointment, frustration and anger at the Barisan ...” could easily be applied to another ethnic group, as each of these reason is universal in nature.

However, *The Sun* did give editorial space for view, which argued that voters’ dissatisfaction towards BN cut across ethnic groups. Tan Siok Choo (2008d: 16) argued that a reason for BN poor showing especially in states along the west coast of peninsula Malaysia is a “... broad-based unhappiness over rising costs of living, an issue that impacted all ethnic groups ...”. National Implementation Task Force adviser Zainal Aznam Yusof (2008: 24) were also quoted in news report suggesting that we might need to take “... another hard look at the pattern of ethnic voting behaviour ” and asked whether we are “... witnessing a transition to less ethnic-based voting ...”

#### WANING OF THE BN MODEL

The basis of Barisan Nasional is that each community is represented by a political party that would bring up each community’s interests to the central committee. The central committee would reach collective decision, usually on the ground of collective national interests. There were suggestions in the English press after the General Election, that maybe such a model of representation had been rejected by Malaysians. These critical suggestions were made directly by political leaders from the Barisan Nasional component parties. This is considered unusual as Barisan Nasional political leaders seldom aired their opinions openly. In addition to giving editorial spaces to these critical views, media practitioners also published critical comments by their writers as well as quoting experts in their analysis.

In the post-election press conference, MCA president Ong Ka Ting were asked if MCA candidates losses meant that the Chinese were rejecting MCA, Ong sidestepped in answering the question, merely to assert that he would

not “... allow such a perception to affect its determination to serve the community ...” (MCA to study 2008: N8). However, Ong did admit that MCA campaigned on the premise that they need more MCA representatives in the Cabinet and that the reduced numbers “... will definitely affect to some extent the effectiveness and representation in the future ...”.

SAPP president Yong Teck Lee also observed that the election results showed that PKR had performed better than expected in urban areas of Sabah where DAP has long had a presence (Split in opposition 2008: N33). Yong concluded that this might mean that some young voters are more inclined towards PKR, which projects a multi-racial image.

Gua Musang MP Tengku Razaleigh was reported as saying that “... BN and UMNO’s legitimacy and strength ... is now in question ...”. Tengku Razaleigh reasoned that people are saying that UMNO has lost its legitimacy to represents the Malays due to UMNO’s “... stunning defeat in the Malay heartland states of Kedah and Kelantan ...”.

Barisan Nasional were also used to projecting a united front and stand in issues concerning Malaysians, preferring to keep inter-component parties’ negotiations behind closed doors. Other component parties within Barisan Nasional were known to be “... working quietly and in camera on sensitive issues with UMNO”. Former Minister for Energy, Water and Communication Dr Lim Keng Yaik from Gerakan suggested, “... maybe this is not enough any more ...” (Sim & Wong 2008: N15). MCA vice president Donald Lim Siang Chai also suggested that MCA should rethink “... its stand to negotiate through internal channels ...” (Early MCA polls 2008: N20). MCA vice president Donald Lim Siang Chai was also quoted as saying that the election showed that “... the Chinese community and the MCA grassroots had lost confidence in the party leadership and its policies ...” (Early MCA polls 2008: N20). This means that the Chinese in general had given up on the model of representation through Barisan Nasional.

Former MCA vice president Dr Chua Soi Lek suggested another possibility on why the Chinese abandoned MCA in the general election. He said the MCA “... had been overemphasizing Chinese issues” (Yeow 2008: 10). Dr Chua said, “... in multicultural Malaysia, not everyone is interested in how many scholarships or schools have been built for the Chinese. The problem is the party still singing an old tune, leaving younger Chinese and non-Chinese voters unable to identify themselves with the party ...” This statement implicitly suggests that the old model of ethnic representation practiced by BN might no longer be able to attract younger voters.

Selangor PKR deputy youth chief Khairul Anuar Ahmad Zainuddin suggested that “... the people basically decided that they would vote for any party as long as it is not Barisan Nasional ...” (Opposition captures Selangor

2008: N14). This suggestion is not exactly off the mark considering that some of the Opposition candidates that won are virtually unknown before the general election or of little political experience. For example, PKR candidate Loh Gwo Burne who won the Kelana Jaya parliamentary seat was only known for his 'hidden-video-taping' skills in the Lingam tape case. The other 'unique' candidate that won was DAP's M. Manoharan for the Kota Alam Shah state seat. M. Manoharan is the Hindraf legal adviser and was detained under ISA throughout the election campaign period. Despite his absence, he won the state seat.

Former Minister for Energy, Water and Communication Dr Lim Keng Yaik also suggested that "... the arrogant attitude of some Barisan politicians ..." as the reason for the poor showing of Barisan Nasional candidates in the general election. He was quoted as saying that "... the arrogance of the party on power must stop, such as the wielding of the keris and comments uttered during the UMNO general assembly and in Parliament ..." must not be repeated (Sim & Wong 2008: N15). Dr Lim suggested "... UMNO must take action against such members to ensure stability within the ruling coalition ..." (Keng Yaik Address 2008:12). This implies that the action of some members of the ruling coalition – which is out of touch with the general public – are jeopardising the appeal of the BN model of ethnic representation to the general public.

Despite some attempts by UMNO leaders to attribute the Barisan Nasional poor showing to the inability of their component partners – MCA, Gerakan and MIC to deliver – Shamsul Akmar (2008: N13) pointed out that "... UMNO suffered a mauling as well ..." Thus, Shamsul speculated that the shift of supports to the Opposition could signal a systemic failure of the BN model in the eyes of Malaysians.

Baradan Kuppusamy (2008b: N16) wrote in *The Star* that the failure of MIC president S. Samy Vellu in winning the Sungai Siput parliamentary seat was "... the only thing that matters to many ordinary Indians ..." The article quoted a teacher A. Perumal as saying that "... people are angry at him more than anything else. He has been lording over us for 30 years ..." In a way, all that are wrong with the Indian community in Malaysia are – rightly or wrongly – attributed to the failure of MIC in representing the Indian community interests in the Barisan Nasional model of representation.

In an analysis published in *The Sun* by the political editor, Zainon Ahmad (2008: 8) posed a rhetorical question:

... After all, which party leaders raised the keris, said that "we can go it alone as we are 60% of the population," spoke of unfinished Malay agenda, shouted to non-Muslims to stay away from matters involving Islam, insisted that Allah is exclusive to Muslims, called for the extension of the NEP and rebuked a delegation of non-Malay ministers when they made representation to the prime minister to register their dissatisfaction?"

Zainon (2008:8) maintained that "... it is clear who or which party the leaders of the peninsula BN component parties blamed for the punishment their parties received at the hands of voters ..." In addition to the arrogance, Zainon Ahmad (2008: 8) observed that UMNO "... members have become so greedy, so obsessed with self-enrichment that perjuangan (struggle) has taken on a new meaning ...".

In another analysis by Terence Fernandez (2008b: 5) of *The Sun*, he argued that, "... the Chinese also gave their vote to the Opposition as a show of no confidence in the MCA and Gerakan for these parties' failure in defending issues that affected their rights such as education and civil liberties ..." This argument points to the direct failure of ethnic representation within the BN political framework.

Critical opinions from experts were also given editorial spaces in the newspapers. For example, Professor Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi summed up the sentiment when he said that, "... the opposition had won because the people were voting against BN ..." (Nurris Ishak 2008: 31).

Karim Raslan (2008b: N22) writing in *The Star* after the general election results relates two experiences when he was travelling across the country during the campaign period. The first was of a mostly SUVs and MPVs UMNO convoy on the way to campaign stop in Kelantan. In contrast, another convoy that Karim bumped into consists of mostly 'Kancils' and 'Kelisas' that belong to PAS members and supporters. Karim concluded that these two incidents reflect what had become to UMNO – "...self-interest had overwhelmed the once respected party of Merdeka..."

#### CONFIDENCE FROM THE 2004 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS

This is a rather critical framing used in the media to suggest that Barisan Nasional's attitude might be contributing to their own losses in the General Election. For example, *The Star's* Wong Chun Wai (2008: N12) suggested that perception on the grassroots level was that, the BN "... had become too strong and that there was a need for a strong check and balance ...", after Barisan Nasional won 198 seats against 21 seats by the Opposition in the 2004 general election. Wong also suggested that the result reflected the grassroots desire for their "... MPs to be more humble and certainly more careful with their choice of words ..." (Wong 2008: N12).

Over-confidence was also suggested as one of the reasons for the loss of MIC president S. Samy Vellu in Sungai Siput parliamentary seat to Parti Sosialis Malaysia's Dr Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj. In that article published by *The Star*, it was believed that some of the local politicians had been overly confident and had not pulled their weight to garner support for S. Samy Vellu (Not a happy 2008: N24).

Media practitioners also quoted critical views from experts in their news reports. For example, Ibrahim Suffian of Merdeka Center suggested that PAS might have gone into the polls with a better preparation compared to UMNO (Zubaidah 2008: 18). This lack of preparation might be explained by the long overdue confidence carried from the 2004 General Election results.

National Implementation Task Force adviser Zainal Aznam Yusof (2008:24) suggested that "... BN had severely underestimated the extent and depth of the discontent of the electorate and has misread public sentiments ...". The 2004 general election results could also led to the Barisan Nasional to "... grossly underestimate ..." the strength of the opposition.

PKR strategic adviser Saifuddin Nasution said the election results "... was a reflection of how many Malaysians felt after four years under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi ..." (Nik Aziz likens 2008: N14).

#### INTERNAL BICKERING

This framing is used to convey the message that the Opposition was not exactly strong that they defeated the Barisan Nasional in some seats. Rather, it was the internal bickering of the Barisan Nasional component parties that contributed to their defeats. This framing is commonly used by the media practitioners in post election news reports, especially when reporting on seats that the BN had lost. The focus is on the lack of co-operation among the component parties within the Barisan Nasional, rather than on other factors that might contribute to the loss of Barisan Nasional in that particular seat.

For example, Terence Fernandez (2008: 8) of *The Sun* gave the example of Pandan parliamentary seat in Federal Territory where "... UMNO, Gerakan and MCA divisions were not supportive ..." In another analysis published in *The Sun*, Ng and Giam (2008: 8) argued that MCA could have fared better if not for its "... protracted internal bickering going as far back as the Team A-Team B leadership strife that resulted in the double retirement of former president Dr Ling Liong Sik and his deputy Lim Ah Lek ..."

Rosli Zakaria of *New Straits Times* (2008b: 13) claimed that "... the results in the state seats of Ladang and Batu Buruk, and the Kuala Terengganu and Marang parliamentary constituencies were the obvious ones where sabotage occurred ..." Internal bickering was also suggested as the reason for the Barisan Nasional defeat in Perak. *New Straits Times* article suggested that disagreement over the choice of candidates contributed to the losses of several seats in Perak (March 8 – a 2008: 22). Meanwhile in Kelantan, internal fighting and sabotage (*cah keting* in Kelantanese Malay) is also identified as one of the reason for UMNO's poor performance in the state (Simon 2008b: 23).

*The Sun* political editor Zainon Ahmad (2008: 8) claimed that UMNO party leaders down the line say UMNO "... is empty inside and the once feared election machinery is no longer functioning ..." In addition to that, Zainon argued that UMNO were also not united during the election. He gave an example of UMNO in Perlis, Terengganu, Kedah, Perak and Selangor. In Perlis, Zainon observed that "... party leaders fought before the polls, and they were still fighting quite publicly a week after the last vote was counted ...". In fact, a week after the general election, UMNO political leaders were still fighting publicly on the appointment of the Menteri Besar post (Shahidan believes Radzi 2008: N4). Terengganu too has its 'warring factions'.

Kubang Pasu Member of Parliament Johari Baharom said that among the reasons for the BN's poor showing were "... internal issues at division level, wrong choice of candidates by the state Barisan and UMNO liaison committee which led to member spoiling their votes and sabotaging the party and the lack of co-operation given to new candidates by those who were dropped ..." (Ahmad Fairuz Othman 2008: 12).

Internal bickering also affected other component political parties within the Barisan Nasional coalition. People's Progressive Party (PPP) president M. Kayveas attributed his electoral loss to sabotage from MIC and Gerakan (Kayveas blames two 2008: 8). Kayveas was reported as claiming that "... a MIC vice-president had told the party's workers not to support him ..." and that he was "... snubbed by the Gerakan because of the wrangle over the Taiping parliamentary seat".

Merdeka Center director Ibrahim Suffian suggested that it was UMNO's internal bickering that hampered their effort in capturing Kelantan since 1990 (Zubaidah 2008: 18). Goh Ban Lee (2008: 6), writing in *The Sun* claimed that there "... were stories of back-stabbing from party members who did not get to stand and refusal of candidates to pay exorbitant sums for putting up flags and banners ..." in Penang.

A political observer in Terengganu noted that Barisan Nasional did not lose eight state seats because PAS was strong, but because Barisan Nasional "... made it public that all is not well in the party ..." (Rosli Zakaria 2008: 19). Abdul Ghani Abu Bakar said that "... The General Election is not the time to sulk and protest if one is not nominated. It is not that this is not known to UMNO, but it keeps surfacing each time a general election is held and it is annoying to voters..."

#### A MATURING DEMOCRACY GOING BEYOND DEVELOPMENT

Framing the 2008 General Election results as a sign of maturing society is perhaps a neutral way of making sense of the result. By using this frame, media practitioners would attribute the result to the general changes in society, rather than as a sign of shortcomings of any

particular political party. Political campaigns in Malaysia during elections were usually laden with promises of development funds and projects. This might no longer work in persuading voters to support the Barisan Nasional candidates as suggested by Ibrahim Suffian of Merdeka Center (Zubaidah 2008: 18).

Karim Raslan (2008: N27) shared the same position when he argued that "... promises of allocations and government contracts can no longer work ..." Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani (2009: 108-9) felt that the "... BN leader should realise by now that campaigning on the basis of track records . . . no longer works...". Karim Raslan (2008: N27) suggested "... socio-political right and a sense of fairness are becoming increasingly important to ordinary Malaysians ...".

Johor Baru Member of Parliament Shahrir Samad suggested that the 12th General Election results "... clearly show political maturity of voters ..." as well as proving "... the political maturity of the country's election process and democracy ..." (Shahrir: Defeats sign 2008: 4). Shahrir Samad – together with Social Strategic Foundation executive director Dr Denison Jayasooria – commented in a public forum later that it was "... due to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's reforms and opening of democratic space that the general election went the way it did ..." (Pak Lah's reforms 2008: N8).

Dr Denison Jayasooria suggested that it was Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi – after securing resounding victory in the 2004 general election – that "... opened up democratic space and made substantial changes that involved widespread consultation with the people ...". This led to the change of values in Malaysians as they begin to go beyond physical developments and demands for "... transparency, accountability, good governance and fight against corruption ...".

#### UNDERESTIMATING THE NEW MEDIA

The 12th General Election saw the coming of age of the new media, particularly the internet and mobile phones. While the influence was mostly obvious in the urban areas along the west coast of the peninsula, Centre for Independent Journalism (2008: 1) noted that "... it reflected the levels of crisis in confidence towards the traditional and big media houses ...". In a way, alternative media like the Internet broke the information monopoly of the government on the media and provided a "... platform for information distribution for people not in power ..." (Mohd Azizuddin 2009: 115). In addition to that, Weiss (2008: 2) quoted a suggestion by an analyst that "... mainstream coverage . . . may actually have worked against the BN ...".

This framing suggest that it was the failure of BN in using the new media to spread their election campaign to the electorates rather than a rejection of their campaign by the electorates that contribute to their losses in some

seats. The focus of this framing is on the medium, not the message. Kelantan BN chief Annuar Musa admitted that the BN failure in state could be partly due to the misjudgement of the impact of websites and blogs on young outstation voters (Simon 2008b: 23).

Former Minister for Energy, Water and Communication Dr Lim Keng Yaik also suggested that "... the lack of cyber campaigning ..." could be one of the reason contributing to the losses of Barisan Nasional in the General Election (Sim & Wong 2008: N15). In fact, the ruling government admitted that one of the major factors in determining the 2008 General Election results was the new media of the Internet (Koh 2008: 25). In both comments by Annuar and Dr Lim, there were no mentions of rejection by electorate of their election campaign.

PAS president press secretary Roslan Shahrir Mohd Shahrir said he "... believed their online publication *Harakah Daily* and web TV contributed immensely to their win ..." (Lau 2008: 12). Roslan said he believed the website recorded 50 percent increase in hits because "... people were so hungry for information ...".

An article published in *New Straits Times* claims that a survey conducted in 1999 found that "... the more frequently a person surfs the internet to read election-related news, the more likely he is to vote for the opposition ..." (Ramachandran & Vijandren 2008: 29, 30). The finding was echoed in a similar survey during the 2004 general election.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia academician Professor Dr Shamsul Amri Baharuddin concluded that "... the government was totally unprepared for the impact of the alternative media of the internet and SMS during the general election ..." (Ramachandran & Vijandren 2008: 29, 30). A *New Sunday Times* street poll also found sentiment among the general public was that the government had underestimated the power of the alternative media.

#### WHAT IT MEANS FOR MALAYSIA

Besides the usual coverage of the post-election reactions from various parties, coverage in the English-language press also attempt to make sense of the election results by giving it meanings and interpretations. This part will discuss the framing of the predictions and interpretations of the general election results by the English-language press by political leaders, media practitioners, and experts. As this is a political event, most of the predictions and interpretations are centred on political impact.

#### FEDERAL-STATE RELATIONS

UiTM law professor Shad Faruqi Saleem wrote in *The Star* that the Opposition-led states like Penang, Selangor, Kedah, Perak and Kelantan "... can be expected to assert themselves in all areas where the Constitution confers

them legislative, executive and financial autonomy ...” (Shad 2008: N28). Federal and Opposition-controlled state governments conflict “... will be likely and constitutional procedures for resolving these differences will be tested to the full ...”.

The provision of power would become clearer when State Government exercise their power in deciding matters under their purview. This came a week after the general election, when the choice of Perlis Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) by Prime Minister Abdullah was turned down by the Raja of Perlis Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Putra Jamalullail. His Highness appointed Bintong assemblyman Md Isa Sabu instead of the proposed Perlis Barisan Nasional chief Shahidan Kassim (Rulers picks Md 2008: N4) in accordance with Article 39 (2) of the Laws of the Constitution of Perlis.

However, UMNO-linked *New Straits Times* framed the situation as a tussle between Shahidan Kassim and Md Isa Sabu and that Prime Minister Abdullah “... had given the go-ahead to Shahidan Kassim to continue with the job ...” (Anis Ibrahim et al. 2008: 4). Shahidan “...insisted he had been given the mandate by Abdullah ...” and Isa’s decision to accept Raja of Perlis’s appointment “... can be regarded as going against the PM’s orders and is an opposition (member) ...” The second principle of Rukunegara requires all citizens to pledge loyalty to the Ruler and country, not to any political party.

In Terengganu, the initial plan for Idris Jusoh to take his oath of office as The Menteri Besar on March 9 was postponed (Reps to meet 2008: 11). Rumours and speculations on who would be the next Menteri Besar were framed as ‘uncertainty’ by UMNO-linked *New Straits Times* (Rosli Zakaria 2008b: 13). This framing is only expected as it is in the interest of UMNO to maintain the status quo – having the final say in the appointment of the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) – and any challenge towards the status quo would be framed as a threat to the nation, even though it was UMNO’s hegemony that was being challenged here.

*The Star’s* Wong Chun Wai (2008: N12) predicted that the “... federal-state relations will never be the same again ...”. At the local government level, Wong (2008: N12) predicted that there would be “... massive changes as politically-appointed councillors will have to make way...” In another analysis, Wong Chun Wai (2008b: N14) also predicted that it would be “... a challenge to make the new state governments function smoothly ...” PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim echoed Wong’s sentiment when he was quoted as saying that “... politics in Malaysia is not going to be the same any more ...” (People have voted 2008: N21).

#### REVIEW OF PROJECTS

In the framing of the impact of the 2008 General Election results, some differences are noted between *The Star*

and *New Straits Times*, as well as among political leaders. Some State Barisan Nasional leaders acted less gentlemanly when they called for the review of federal projects in places where Barisan Nasional had lost. However, UMNO leader Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and its media *New Straits Times* projected a united front when both said that major federal projects would go on as planned.

Wong Chun Wai of *The Star* predicted that the Barisan Nasional controlled Federal Government “... may even review its numerous projects in states lost to the Opposition ...” (Wong 2008: N12). However, in an article without quoting any source, NST predicted that “... it is unlikely that projects under the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER) in Penang will be shelved ...” (Major projects won’t 2008: 5).

Among the political leaders, there were calls by Penang UMNO liaison committee secretary Azhar Ibrahim for the Federal Government to scrap all the mega projects in Penang “...in view of the people’s clear rejection of Barisan Nasional ...” (Call to scrap 2008: N12), and also “... to stop the Rapid Penang bus service ...” (UMNO: Stop funding 2008: 4). Azhar took pain to point out that “... this was not Penang UMNO taking revenge but we are actually giving the people what they want ...”. In this statement, the distinction between the Federal Government and the ruling political parties are deliberately blurred.

However, new Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng was reported as saying that “... he does not expect any delays in the implementation of approved mega projects in the state that come under the purview of the Federal Government ...” (No signs of 2008: 12). Lim’s statement gained an unexpected support from the former Chief Minister Dr Koh Tsu Koon when Koh “... appealed to the Federal Government to continue with the implementation of mega projects in the state although it was now ruled by Opposition parties ...” (Keep all mega 2008: N12). Koh was reported as saying that “... these projects are crucial for the future economy of Penang and its neighbouring states ...” (Sharanjit Singh & Audrey Dermawan 2008: 8).

Melaka Chief Minister Mohd Ali Rustam also announced that he would review new projects coming into Melaka City as “... hope of making it a more vibrant one had been dashed by DAP’s control of it ...” (Carvalho 2008: N12). He said the Barisan Nasional wanted to develop Melaka but “... the rakyat is not so interested ...”.

On the other hand, the Negeri Sembilan state government was reported as saying that they would “... ensure the continued development of areas represented by the opposition ...” (Opposition areas ‘will 2008: 13). The Negeri Sembilan Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) Mohamad Hasan were reported as saying that the State Government “... have no intention of punishing the people who voted for the opposition ...” and that it is “... the time for BN

to work hard and serve the people better so that we can win back these seats ...”.

Despite statements by state leaders, Prime Minister Abdullah declared that the implementation of mega projects “... would go on as planned ...” (PM: We will 2008: 2). He was reported as saying that “... these are Federal Government projects that cover all states ...” and that it is the Barisan Nasional “... responsibility to the states and [the Federal Government] will not withdraw it ...”. These statements by politicians in the early period of post-election reflects to a certain extent the frustration of the part of these politicians to the apparent failure of developmental politics, and partly reflect their unfamiliarity of the separation of power between different components of the government.

#### ELECTORAL PROCESS

Before the election, there are constant complains – especially from Opposition – that the electoral process are rigged and the Election Commission decisions are often biased towards the ruling coalition BN. However, as suggested in the *New Straits Times* editorial, “... there can be no more carping over the electoral process in [Malaysia] being rigged, flawed or unfair ...” (The electorate has 2008: 2). NST even proposed that the Opposition candidates apologise to Election Commission chairman Abdul Rashid Rahman and his staff. The result, according to NST, put paid to Opposition claims that the election process lacked transparency and that the Election Commission was biased towards the ruling coalition (Barisan Nasional holds 2008: 2). Professor of Law at Universiti Teknologi MARA Dr Shad Faruqi also observed, that “... all in all the integrity of the voting and counting processes was demonstrated ...” (Shad Saleem Faruqi 2008: N28). The Election Commission acquitted itself well.

#### LIVELIER PARLIAMENT

*The Star* speculated that Malaysians could “... expect more heated exchanges in Parliament now that the Opposition has quadrupled its seats ...” (Samy 2008: N10). The DAP-PAS-PKR alliance increased their total seats from 21 to 82. The article also quoted unnamed sources speculating that “... it would be tougher job for Barisan party whip to ensure the daily attendance of all its MPs, and it might be made compulsory ...” This increase of Opposition MPs, however, “... is not likely to affect the passing of bills ...”.

However, *New Straits Times* was quick to resort to the old tried and tested ‘ethnic’ framing when it published an article describing a “polarised Dewan Rakyat” as the “... most unfortunate fallout from the 12th general election ...” (Syed Nadzri 2008: 6). *New Straits Times* group editor Syed Nadzri Syed Harun wrote that the new Dewan Rakyat would have a “...heavily Malay-Bumiputera on

one side and a fair mix of opposition on the other ...”, a situation that was framed as “... not very healthy ...” in the article. The article were also quick to point out to the Chinese community that they have made the wrong choice as now they are in an exact situation that top BN leaders had been cautioning them about throughout the campaign. The non-Bumiputera, as the article concluded, would only have “... a louder voice in Parliament but outside the corridors of power ...”.

Shad Faruqi (2008: N28) predicted that Malaysians “... can now expect some assertiveness on the part of Parliament vis-à-vis the executive ...” and the government “... will not be able to bulldoze constitutional amendments through with ease as in the past ...” Roger Tan (2008c: 24) also shared the same sentiment when he wrote that “... the Barisan Nasional government will now be unable to amend the Federal Constitution without the support of the opposition, neither will it be able to make uniform laws for all the states ...”.

#### REVIEW OF THE OLD POLITICAL ARRANGEMENT

Barisan Nasional would have to “... take a serious review of itself ...” Wong Chun Wai (2008b: N14) declared that “... the Old Politics is over ...”, and he predicted that it would be harder to convince the “... younger voters to support a party purely on communal grounds ...” This, as observed by Shad Faruqi (2008: N28), “... demonstrates a new political awakening ...” as the electorate is no longer “... swayed exclusively by racial and religious appeal ...”.

Shamsul Akmar (2008: N13) wrote in *The Star* that the poor showing of UMNO candidates mean “... a large number of Malay voters who favoured UMNO and its [coalition] partners decided otherwise this time around and instead voted for the Opposition ...” Shamsul also speculated that a large number of Malay voters might not care about “... Malay rights and privileges that UMNO fought for ...” anymore. Otherwise, Shamsul reasoned, “... surely PAS, PKR and especially DAP, would not be their alternatives ...”.

UMNO supreme council member and Member of Parliament for Padang Rengas, Nazri Aziz, shared a similar sentiment when he predicted that the 12th general election results “...signal the beginning of the possible demise of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and special rights for the Malays ...” (Shahanaaz Habib 2008: N6). Nazri said it appeared that the “...Malays, especially in the town areas, had become more confident now and felt they could compete with the other races on a level playing field ...”. He concluded that “... the NEP is not something that can be used to persuade the Malays to support the Barisan Nasional ...”.

#### TWO-PARTY POLITICAL SYSTEM

A two-party political system seems likely to evolve from the outcome of this general election. Shad Faruqi

(2008: N28) observed that the "... the world's longest surviving multi-ethnic coalition – Barisan Nasional – was challenged in most electoral districts by an informal multi-ethnic Opposition ...". This, according to Shad Faruqi's prediction, could be the "... beginnings of a wide spectrum two-party system ...", even though he conceded, "... it's too early to tell ..." (Nurris Ishak 2008: 31).

Universiti Malaya historian Professor Dr Khoo Kay Kim said Malaysia has never come close to having a two-party system, and at the moment, the signs are not pointing that way either as "... component parties of the so-called Barisan Alternatif are squabbling among themselves ...". On the other hand, UMNO vice-president Muhyiddin Yassin was sceptic that Malaysia is heading towards a two-party political system. He was quoted as saying that "... from the looks of it, it will be a long time coming ..." (Nurris Ishak 2008: 31).

#### CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The 2008 General Election result also showed that the "... overwhelming control of the ruling party over the conventional media was to some extent neutralised ..." (Shad 2008: N28). It was the rise of the new media – Internet and SMS – that enabled the Opposition to disseminate alternative information leading to the general election.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi acknowledged that the BN government lost the online war in the General Election. He was quoted as saying that "... We didn't think it was important. It was a serious misjudgment. We thought that the newspapers, the print media, the television were important but young people were looking at text messages and blogs ..." (Internet served a 2008: 2). The PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang also acknowledged this when he observed that, "... support for the Opposition was based on the information flow generated from the Internet ..." (Hadi issues warning 2008: N32).

An analysis in *New Straits Times* declared that the Internet in Malaysia "... came of age with the 12th General Election ..." (Lee 2008: 25). It enabled opposition parties "... which have long complained of bias in the traditional media to reach voters ...". Lee predicted that the "... cyberspace is now the new frontier for BN ...". The writer concluded that the general election results "... underscored how Malaysia has come to rely on cyberspace for information ...".

In a commentary a week after the general election, Wong Chui Wai of *The Star* wrote that the impact of the new media might "... not be as strong as it has been made out to be ..." (Wong 2008c: N16). Wong contended that urban Malaysia preferred alternative media as channels of information to the mainstream media, but noted that its impact is limited to rural folks as most of these rural folks "... do not have access to the Internet and so did not

benefit from information sent via online media, blogs or email ...". Wong suggested that "... a serious and honest soul searching is required [by the media] to truly feel the pulse of Malaysians ...". In the new political landscape, Wong argued that "... the media, including government-run TV stations, must be prepared to re-look its editorial policies ...".

Just World president Chandra Muzaffar (2008: N18, N20) were more direct when he asserted that the local mainstream print and electronic media campaign "... was so propagandistic that it turned off a lot of people ...". Chandra speculated that "... given the increasingly critical attitude of the voting population, it is quite conceivable that Barisan media propaganda may have undermined the Barisan itself ...".

#### CONCLUSION

In the post election period, it appears that media were unsure on how to react to the changing political landscape in Malaysia. As noted by Yeoh (2008b: 254), "... the most noticeable change is the way mainstream English newspapers cover political news ...". He suggested that there are two ways of looking at these positive developments. Perhaps, the government might finally realised that "... the public wants and demands more openness ...", or perhaps, the government is "... simply too preoccupied with other things – namely, quelling dissent within its own component parties ...".

Malaysian media were also perhaps unsure of how to fit the election results into common frames used by media in the past to make sense and give meanings to events. They were also some less than favourable interpretations and framing of the elections towards the Barisan Nasional. As for this more open attitude towards different views, perhaps the "... editors are hedging their bets ..." as the dynamic and uncertain political environment after the election might still spring some surprises.

In taking in views from different sides and sources, Malaysian media generally and Malaysian English newspapers in particular, might actually be doing what they are supposed to do in the first place, that is, being a platform for exchange of views and lively debates. And that is the irony of the whole situation.

#### NOTE

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