

[Book Review]

Syed Arabi Idid and Mazni Buyong. *Malaysia's General Election 1995: People, Issues and Media Use*. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Asia Foundation, 1995, 121pp.

The Malaysian 9th general election, which was held on 24th and 25th April 1995, marked a milestone in the history of the country's general elections. The 14-party governing coalition, the *Barisan Nasional* (BN, National Front) led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), won an unprecedented landslide victory with more than a four-fifths majority in the Parliament (*Dewan Rakyat*). In the state legislatures, the BN was returned in 10 of 11 states - a better margin compared to the previous election.

Two communication scholars of the National University of Malaysia (UKM, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) have written an commendable book which provides not only a detailed analysis on the 1995 general election, but also invaluable insight into the influence of the public media use upon the formation of political opinions during the election campaign. Idid and Buyong's election analysis is valuable for understanding why the BN was able to win with the highest number of seats ever in both parliament and state elections. In addition, few studies have done little to clarify the impact of the government media control on the electorates' voting decision. The authors' ambitious attempt therefore should be highly appreciated.

The book starts off with an analysis of the 1995 general election in a highly readable manner. The authors pointed out that the BN's victory and the opposition debacle resulted primarily from several factors as follows:

1) a large proportion of the public benefited from

the rapid economic growth under the Mahathir administration;

2) the BN's pragmatic manifesto entitled "Vision, Justice and Efficiency," which was based upon the well-known concept of *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020),¹ added ballots to the BN's box during the election;

3) except the *Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah* (APU, United Muslim Movement), major opposition parties could not reach any electoral pact in an attempt to unseat the BN owing to different political principles; and finally,

4) main opposition parties especially the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) made fatal strategic mistakes in the election campaign in the Chinese dominant Penang state.

The authors then attempt to clarify the extent to which the BN's overwhelming victory resulted from its control of the media. In order to avoid untoward incidents, the campaign was confined to only 10 days and public rallies were strictly banned. Except for political meetings (*ceramat*), the only other source of information was the popular media. News coverages of the opposition parties provided by the media were scant, mainly because the media was (and is) primarily controlled by several BN component parties.² Not surprisingly, the BN took full advantage of the media in order to garner the urban electorates' support, and also to infiltrate the opposition stronghold, especially Kelantan where the opposition coalition, the APU, won all parliamentary and state seats contested in the preceding election in 1990.³

In the last part of the book, the authors clarified how the public recognised political issues and from which sources they got information on these issues by analysing data from a total of 979 respondents selected through quota sampling. The first of the main findings was that mass media

deeply penetrated society either in the form of television or newspapers and to a lesser extent, radio. The respondents used television more frequently than newspapers as a source of information. However, it should be noted that the "higher educated" group was inclined to use printed media rather than television.

Furthermore, the authors pointed out that the respondents paid considerable attention to politics and public affairs. There was a strong positive correlation between the attention individuals paid towards political news provided by the mass media, and their education/income levels.

Finally, two-pronged issues based upon *Wawasan 2020*, that is, the future development and direction of the country, were perceived as important political matters raised in the media during the election campaign. This fact suggests that the media, to a great extent, influenced the formation of the public political opinion.

There were only three trivial disappointments encountered in reading the book. Firstly, the study did not undertake any comparative analysis between major racial groups. It is widely accepted that each racial group would react distinctively to political issues, in particular, to the implementation of the Malay-ethnocentric affirmative action. The lack of racial viewpoints, therefore, could be the major shortcoming of this study.

Secondly, the authors failed to provide any accounts behind the fact that more than half of the electorates in Kelantan still support the opposition coalition, and that, more surprisingly, the APU kept its momentum in terms of polling in several poverty-stricken states of Peninsular Malaysia, including Perlis, Kedah and Terengganu. It is well known that a large part of poor Malays in those poverty stricken states steadfastly supported the opposition coalition despite the BN's cunning

political manoeuvres and seductively accommodating patronage measures. It seems that the increase in income differentials under the New Economic Policy (NEP) within the Malay community, or more precisely between affluent urban Malays and indigent rural counterparts, prevented an occasion for the governing coalition to penetrate the opposition stronghold. In view of that, it seems that the authors should not have disregarded the political importance of the firm loyalty of low-class Malays towards the APU.

Finally, readers will encounter a number of irritating editorial errors, especially misspellings, which might make readers recant the importance of the book. More careful line-editing measures should have been taken.

Despite my apprehension, the book would be of great value to those with any interest in the general election and the impact of mass media on the electorates' voting decisions in Malaysia.

Notes

1. The Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad presented this concept in his inauguration speech of the Malaysian Business Council held in February 1991.
2. For detailed discussion about intricate media control by BN component parties, see Edmund T. Gomez. *Political Business: Corporate Involvement of Malaysian Political Parties*. Queensland : James Cook University of North Queensland, 1994.
3. For more information on the 1990 and 1995 general elections, see Khong Kim Hoong, *Malaysia's General Election 1990: Continuity, Change, and Ethnic Politics*, Research Notes and Discussions Paper No.74. Singapore : Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1991; Akira Ishida. "The Malaysian General Election of 1995." *Electoral Studies*, Vol.15, No.1, 1996.

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