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Historic victory in Malaysia

Sergio Grassi explains how a 92-year-old defector came to dominate the polls

There's a predictability to Malaysian elections. Since the country gained independence in 1957, the United Malays National Organisation has won every single one of them – until now.

Last week, Malays delivered a decisive victory to the Hope Pact, a potpourri of centrist, progressive Islamist and nationalist parties, whose manifesto promised better jobs and public services and the curtailing of politicians' power.

Rising living costs and a long-running corruption scandal prompted many Malaysians to withdraw their support for the incumbent prime minister Najib Razak.

Stella Meyer spoke to Sergio Grassi of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Jakarta office about the Hope Pact's unexpected change in fortunes.

Describe what happened in this month's Malaysian elections.

Against everyone's predictions, a coalition of opposition parties known as the Hope Pact (Pakatan Harapan) won the elections, bringing an end to the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) alliance's 61-year reign. And they didn't just scrape in – the Hope Pact won 121 out of 222 seats, so a clear majority.

Meanwhile, Mahathir Mohamad has been sworn in as the world's oldest prime minister, aged 92 - a post he intends to take on for the next two years.

The election day was long and dramatic. Mahathir had to wait until the evening before the King granted him permission to serve, and the ceremony didn't take place till 9.30 at night.

The election campaign focussed a lot on the corruption scandal surrounding the former prime minister Najib Razak. But allegations

his family received illegal payouts from the 1MDB state fund have been flying round for years. Why's it taken up till now for a new government to get elected?

Najib was able to access a lot of resources through his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – the dominant party in the former ruling coalition – and used them to extend his power base, serving as Prime Minister and Finance Minister simultaneously. This enabled him to cling to power while the scandal rolled on for three years.

He also used all sorts of dodgy electoral tactics to maintain his grip on power – gerrymandering, registering voters who didn't actually exist, controlling the media, and intimidating and detaining his critics. He rolled out a series of repressive 'security laws' which enabled the authorities to arrest demonstrators, lawyers, campaigners, journalists, artists and opposition politicians.

So how did the Hope Pact eventually come to power, given all these tactics against them?

A large part of it is down to voter anger – people were just sick of all the corruption. Another factor was Mahathir Mohamad's defection to the opposition. He had served as Prime Minister in the ruling BN coalition between 1981 and 2003, and remains immensely popular and well-respected.

Thirdly, the majority-Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP), which was the largest and most powerful force in Hope Pact coalition, recognised that it is viewed with suspicion by Muslim Malays, and so chose to become a junior coalition partner in the run-up to the election. It campaigned in fewer constituencies, leaving more room for its coalition partners in Malaysia's first-past-the-post system, and undermining attempts by UMNO to brandish the opposition 'anti-Malay'.

What concrete policy changes can we expect from the new government, and what does this change in power mean for democracy in Malaysia?

In their manifesto for the first hundred days, the Hope Pact outlined a series of reforms, including an increased minimum wage, improved health insurance and pensions, and a reduction in student loans. A separate manifesto covering the next parliamentary term promised a two-term limit for the prime minister, and that the prime minister role would no longer be combined with other ministerial posts. Other pledges include creating one million well-paid jobs, and providing affordable healthcare, education and public transport for all. So the

test for the new government will be whether it can actually implement these promises, as well as whether it tolerates dissent.



Sergio Grassi
Jakarta

Sergio Grassi manages the office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) in Jakarta and is responsible for the work of the FES in Malaysia. He spent several years working for FES in Beijing and Sub-Saharan Africa. He studied economics and sinology in Berlin and Beijing.