

Election Year in East Asia

By *Shiraishi Takashi*

THIS year is election year in East Asia. This March presidential elections were held in Taiwan and parliamentary elections took place in Malaysia. In April, national assembly elections were held in Indonesia and South Korea. In May, presidential elections were held in the Philippines. In July, the House of Councilors elections will be held in Japan and the first round of presidential elections will take place in Indonesia, followed by the second round in September. Each of these elections in its own way will be free and fair. The era of developmental authoritarianism is over and the age of democracy has arrived. In the past, under authoritarian governments, “success” in an election was seen as an effective demonstration of the regime’s power to control society. Nowadays, however, elections reflect major societal changes in the society and have begun to stimulate changes in administrations.

What are these elections revealing about the changes that are taking place in East Asia? In Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian was re-elected as the president. In South Korea, the Uri Party of President Roh Moo-hyun won a major victory, taking 152 of the 299 assembly seats. In both of these cases, the victories were achieved with support from young people who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to their parents’ generation, these people have taken a comparatively affluent lifestyle for granted, receiving higher education and embracing confidence in their own abilities and the future. Together with the

advent of such people, there has been a change in the nature of nationalism, and that has brought about a political transformation.

What about Malaysia and Indonesia? In these countries, the change of generations and the transformation of nationalism have not been significant. Of much greater significance has been what might be called the “exorcising of ghosts.”

In March, elections for the national and state assemblies were held in Malaysia, and the National Front (Barisan Nasional) headed by Prime Minister Abdullah bin Ahmad Badawi won a major victory. In the national assembly, the National Front took 64%

of the votes, obtaining 198 of the 218 seats. In contrast, among the opposition parties, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (Parti Islam se-Malaysia, PAS) took seven seats, the Democratic Action Party (Parti Tindakan Demokratik, DAP) took 12, the National Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Nasional) took one and the unaffiliated took one seat. (In the 1999 election, among 193 seats, the National Front took 148, while PAS took 27, DAP took 10 and Keadilan took five.) Why was the National Front so successful in this recent election?

One reason, naturally, is that the Malaysian economy is doing well. A second is that in October of last year,

Photo: REUTERS • SUN



Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah bin Ahmad Badawi (second from right) and his supporters

Table 1 The results of the election for Indonesia's national assembly (as of April 28, 2004)

Golkar (ruling party of the Suharto regime)	21.2% (22.4%)
Democratic Party of Struggle (headed by President Megawati Sukarnoputri)	19.4% (33.7%)
National Awakening Party (headed by former president Abdurrahman Wahid)	11.8% (12.6%)
United Development Party (headed by Vice President Hamzah Haz)	8.3% (10.7%)
Democratic Party (new party headed by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono)	7.5% (NA)
Welfare Justice Party (Islamic)	7.2% (1.4%)
National Mandate Party (headed by Amien Rais, current MPR [National Assembly] Speaker)	6.5% (6.5%)

Note: 2004 election (1999 election)

Badawi, who succeeded Mahathir bin Mohamad as Prime Minister, re-examined the large-scale public works projects approved in the last period of the Mahathir administration. By modifying the system of government procurements, and thereby distancing himself from Mahathir, Badawi was able to recover the support of the middle class, especially the Malay middle class, which was calling for clean government.

This does not mean, however, that Badawi will implement major reforms. On the basis of this major election victory, Badawi will gain even greater control of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) leadership in June. The issue is what will follow.

Over the past 20 years, Malaysian society has become dominated by the middle class. Reflecting this social transformation, the UMNO has become more business-oriented than ever before, in two senses. First, the social bases that supported the party have shifted from farmers, public servants and school teachers to business executives and managers. Second, the central and state UMNO and, in addition, its members themselves, established over 150,000 enterprises, and under Mahathir's privatization policies, everyone profited. What happened there was quite simple.

The UMNO leadership, which controlled the government, distributed business opportunities to its supporters. To obtain business in public works, government-funded development projects and build-operate-transfer (BOT) projects, business executives and managers joined the party to control important positions in the party organization at the state, branch and district levels. To get elected to important party positions, they spent money for the election campaign, and once elected, they naturally tried to recoup their investment, if necessary, establishing new UMNO firms, obtaining business opportunities in public works, government-funded development projects and BOT projects, and demanding that the government

and the party's central leadership distribute more business opportunities to UMNO members and business entities.

To put it in extremely simple terms, if Badawi became earnest about implementing reforms on behalf of cleaning up the government, it would mean that the UMNO itself would be demolished. In all likelihood, he would not do this. In order to establish firm leadership, Badawi felt it necessary to show that he was different from Mahathir. However, it is not possible to destroy the UMNO, which he inherited from Mahathir. This is the Malaysian version of "exorcising ghosts."

The exorcising of ghosts is also an issue in the series of elections in Indonesia, but in a different sense. The results of the election for Indonesia's national assembly (as of April 28) are shown in Table 1.

In short, as a result of this election, the Democratic Party of Struggle suffered a major defeat, Golkar managed to maintain its strength and the new Democratic Party and the Welfare Justice Party made advances.

In the first and second-round presidential elections, scheduled respectively for July and September, the possibility is increasing that Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (former Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs) might defeat the current president Megawati Sukarnoputri. This view is supported by a recent public

opinion poll which showed that 69% of the respondents do not want to see Megawati re-elected. The survey also showed that regardless of who becomes a candidate, Yudhoyono will be first with more than 30% of the vote in the first round and Megawati will be second with more than 20%.

A major reason for this is that since the economic crisis, most Indonesians do not feel that their living conditions have improved, and that under Megawati there is little chance that the economic crisis can be overcome. This being the case, Golkar should have made greater advances. But that did not occur, and there is a special meaning in the emergence of Yudhoyono as a presidential candidate. From the collapse of the Suharto regime to the present, Indonesian politics has continued to be "in transition." That is, Megawati is Sukarno's daughter, and it was Suharto who founded Golkar. As is evident, the ghosts of Sukarno and Suharto continue to dominate and guide Indonesian politics. However, with the appearance of Yudhoyono, it can be said that the exorcising of ghosts is coming to an end, and Indonesian politics is entering a new era. **IS**

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