

Malaysia Program Summary

Since Malaysia's independence in 1957, the country has experienced a series of national elections, but never a change in national government. The ruling coalition (now known as the Barisan Nasional or BN) has held power continuously during Malaysia's post-independence era. In the 2008 general elections, for the first time, the BN lost its two-thirds majority in parliament and also lost control of five state assemblies to the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat. Subsequently, in Sarawak in April 2011, in the only state assembly elections held before national elections due in 2013, the BN retained control of the state assembly but suffered a reduction in its majority. It is in this context that the International Republican Institute (IRI) provides technical assistance, training and consultation to political parties and works to build knowledge and impart skills that enable Malaysian political leaders to more effectively address citizen concerns.

Political Party Strengthening

IRI is working to strengthen political parties at both the national level and in targeted states where the Institute can have impact. IRI works with political parties to run better campaigns, to develop get out the vote (GOTV) drives, to improve platform development and messaging, and to identify and respond to constituent concerns via utilization of public opinion research.

IRI is assisting political parties from both the BN and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalitions in these areas. For example, in advance of the recent Sarawak elections, IRI assisted parties from both coalitions with campaign trainings, GOTV drives and also developed Sarawak-specific polling to better enable parties to develop platforms and messages that met the needs of all Sarawakians.

At present, IRI is assisting parties from both coalitions to improve message development and communication skills. As the next general elections approach, the Institute will focus its efforts on campaign training, GOTV strategies and other efforts to ensure parties identify and respond to their constituents concerns.

Public Opinion Research

IRI continues to support the public opinion research of its longtime local partner, the Merdeka Center, and use this as a mechanism for keeping parties in tune with the citizenry. IRI has conducted several national, peninsular and state polls and focus group discussions on issues such as the economy, politics and social issues. IRI uses public opinion research to increase the knowledge of political parties about voter concerns and beliefs and to assist parties in crafting strategies, platforms and messages.

IRI's current work in this area started in 2009 when the Institute began a groundbreaking series of trainings designed to assist political parties in developing the in-house capacity to conduct and analyze focus group discussions. This training was followed by workshops which allowed focus group moderators to present their findings to their colleagues and craft messages that were used to recruit new political party members and retain existing ones.

Furthermore, in 2007, IRI supported national, state and electoral district polls and surveys that provided a picture of public sentiment in advance of general elections in March 2008. The poll results provided critical information to political parties, academics and civil society organizations.

Democratic Governance

The March 2008 general elections resulted in a high level of turnover within state legislative assemblies, and provided PR lawmakers with an opportunity to govern several states and actually implement their platforms for the first time. Despite heightened expectations that accompanied state-level PR victories, various challenges associated with limited resources, and lack of staff has necessitated a learning process that persists more than two years on.

To respond to these critical issues, IRI began governance programs at the state level in 2010, building the capacity of elected leaders to carry out good governance practices and develop and implement policies that respond to citizen priorities. IRI has introduced this program in the states of Selangor and Penang, as these states have demonstrated particular initiative. IRI has engaged members of state parliaments, political parties and their associated think tanks in productive dialogue, working with them to address the needs of their respective constituencies and to improve their governance practices.

