

Malaysia Program Summary

The International Republican Institute (IRI) began working in Malaysia in 2002, initially supporting the development of public opinion research. Since then, IRI has supported programs in four key areas: public opinion research, strengthening democratic institutions, political party strengthening and civic and voter education.

Currently, IRI supports civic and voter education projects at the grassroots level to increase the knowledge and understanding of the basic tenets of democracy and citizens' rights. IRI also works with political parties, providing trainings on issues such as public opinion research, message development, communication strategies and effective party activities in Parliament.

Political Party Strengthening

Politics in Malaysia is more often than not divided along ethnic lines. IRI works with interested political parties at the national and state level to develop issue-based platforms and promote dialogue based on issue identification, utilizing public opinion research.

The Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition of 14 political parties led by the country's dominant party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), has governed Malaysia for the past 50 years. General elections held in March 2008 resulted in opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and his coalition of Pakatan Rakyat (PR) component parties winning control of five state governments. As a result of this upset victory, political parties in Malaysia are reassessing their strengths and weaknesses and examining alternative policy platforms that will appeal to a broader segment of Malaysian society.

Upcoming elections in the State of Sarawak will be the only state assembly election to occur prior to the next general elections, and it will serve as a barometer for public support for BN and PR component parties. IRI supports political parties who are beginning to lay the groundwork for the election, providing training on campaign strategies, and message development and outreach.

Public Opinion Research

Through a domestic partner, IRI conducts national and regional polling and focus group discussions to understand the issues that are of most concern to voters, including public sentiment about politics, the economy and social issues. IRI and its partner use 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.

In 2009, IRI 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 are used to recruit new political party members and retain existing ones.

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.

Civic and Voter Education

IRI supports activities to increase the availability and accessibility of accurate information on the role of government in Malaysian society. Having partnered with a local civil society organization, IRI supports the Relevant, Empowering and Active Learning, Citizenship Education program which educates Malaysians on differences between local, state and national governments and their rights under each level of government. Special emphasis is given to community activism as a means to promote government action on the issues important to citizens.

