

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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| <b>Abstract</b>               | <p>In this article the author discusses the results of the 2008 election in the country of Malaysia. The ruling political party led by Abdullah Badawi retained control of parliament but with a significantly reduced majority, the author reports. The social policies of the opposition coalition led by Anwar Ibrahim are examined.</p> |

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# Observations

**NEW ORLEANS**

## Toll of toxic trailers

*Anthony Lane*

Two and a half years after Hurricane Katrina, 38,000 families, or approximately 114,000 people, have yet to receive the compensation promised by the federal government and are still living in cramped trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema).

But just when it seemed that post-Katrina New Orleans could not bear witness to greater suffering or government incompetence, Fema made a stunning announcement. Families living in many of these trailers have been exposed to toxic levels of a cancer-causing chemical.

Formaldehyde is an industrial chemical that also occurs naturally. It is often found in materials used by the construction industry, with the effect that minute quantities, on average 16 parts per billion (ppb), are found in most homes. Indeed, the US Environmental Protection Agency allows no more than that proportion in the air of new buildings constructed for its own use. However, recent tests of 519 randomly selected trailers, carried out by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), found that some had levels as high as 590ppb. The study stated that such a concentration would make 5 per cent of adults sick and would cause breathing difficulties for a third of children and elderly people.

The federal government has yet to investigate how this could have occurred. One theory is that after Katrina manufacturers of trailers were faced with such large orders – 144,000 families ended up in mobile homes – that they ran out of low-emission materials.



**First the weather, now the fumes: the plight of Katrina victims just gets worse**

Incredibly, internal documents show that Fema was aware of the difficulty as long ago as March 2006, when reports began coming in of severe health problems. Yet Fema did not run any tests. Emails from its legal department advised that testing for the toxin “would imply Fema ownership of the issue” and that the agency would have no option but to act. Another email read: “Should [tests] indicate some problem, the clock is running on our duty to respond to them.”

In the past two years, trailer occupants have complained of rashes, headaches, asthma, nosebleeds and sore throats. A few have mouth tumours. There are even suggestions that the toxic trailers have killed. A child living in one in Texas died in August 2006. The Fema agent investigating reported that her nose began to burn after her short visit to the trailer. That same year, in St Tammany, Louisiana, a man who had complained about formaldehyde fumes was found dead in his trailer.

Louisiana’s Republican governor, Bobby Jindal, has called Fema’s inaction “simply inexcusable”, while the state’s Democratic

senator, Mary Landrieu, has accused the government of “gross incompetence”.

Visiting last August, I noted surprising numbers of people coughing despite the summer heat. At the time, I presumed this was due to Louisiana having the second-worst health-care indicators in the entire country. But July temperatures can reach as high as 40°C; it is thought that as trailers bake, the concentration of the chemical increases greatly. So the CDC tests, carried out this winter, probably understated the scale of toxin exposure.

Fema is now acting urgently to move people out of the trailers before the summer, and all the elderly within two weeks.

This will not be easy, as New Orleans is desperately short of housing. Rents are 40 per cent higher than before Katrina, which destroyed 41,000 lower-income apartments. The city’s mayor, Ray Nagin, fears that trailer occupants will now be forced out of the city once again, and warned of a “second great displacement” in an open letter to President Bush. Then there are the city’s 12,000 homeless, many in a makeshift

colony below an overpass less than a mile from the city centre.

Even if the mass evacuation is achieved, there are huge health implications, especially for small children whose immune systems have been weakened by two years in these trailers. A pregnant mother who had her trailer tested after her little girl kept falling ill found the level of formaldehyde to be 2,400ppb. The CDC has announced that children who lived in Fema trailers will now be the subjects of a long-term study. In his letter to the president, Mayor Nagin demanded “guaranteed access to state-of-the-art medical care for any future formaldehyde-related medical conditions”.

Mass actions representing tens of thousands of trailer occupants are now being launched against trailer manufacturers. Lawyers representing trailer residents say that Fema itself is likely to become a defendant in the near future.

Donald Powell, Bush’s federal co-ordinator for rebuilding the Gulf Coast, resigned last month, voicing hope that his time in office had helped to restore in Katrina victims at least a “fragile” trust in the federal government.

Yet the reality for many victims of Hurricane Katrina is that, denied compensation for the destruction of their homes and threatened with eviction from New Orleans for a second time, many must struggle to hold the government accountable for the destruction of their health. ●

**MALAYSIA**

## Dangers of democracy

*Sholto Byrnes*

“In some countries the opposition cannot win, but we are not like that.” The words of Dr Mahathir, Malaysia’s longest-serving prime minister, never rang truer than when the results of the recent elections came in. Mahathir’s hand-picked successor, Abdullah Badawi, led the ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), to its

worst result since independence 50 years ago. The BN still has a simple majority, but it is in crisis after the opposition quadrupled its tally of MPs from 19 to 82.

Gone was the crucial two-thirds majority the BN needed to amend the constitution. Gone was BN control over four of the country's 13 states, as was any hope of regaining the one state previously held by the opposition. Gone, too, was the longest-serving (self-serving, many would say) cabinet minister and head of the Malaysian Indian Congress, Samy Vellu, one of four cabinet members to lose their seats.

Badawi gambled on holding elections just before the de facto opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, was allowed to stand for public office again. He lost spectacularly, and Keadilan, the reform party set up as a vehicle for the former deputy prime minister, jailed under Mahathir, emerged as the biggest opposition party in parliament.

It's bad news for Badawi. But is it bad news for Malaysia? The election should silence critics who called the country a democracy in name only. The stranglehold of racial politics whereby three main parties delivered to the BN the votes of the Malays, Chinese and Indians (in turn roughly 60, 30 and 10 per cent of the population) has been loosened, allowing hope that a politics of ideas and principles might one day replace that of race. In Penang State the opposition DAP (Democratic Action Party) won, and the Chinese-led party's support came from an unexpected quarter. "Even the Malays voted DAP!" was one text circulating among astonished Malaysians.

"The government needed a kick up the butt" was another, expressing widespread dismay at the performance of Badawi, whose affability barely cloaks weakness, indecisiveness and unwillingness to confront the corruption he had promised to root out. (It didn't help that his closest adviser is his son-in-law.) The tens of thousands who attended protest rallies held by Bersih, a "clean-up public life" group, and the Hindu Rights Action Force in Kuala Lumpur last



**Hear no evil: Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi led the ruling coalition to its worst ever election result**

year were dismissed by ministers as "troublemakers". Now a fair few of those irritants are MPs.

That democracy has dealt such a blow to a ruling elite grown arrogant and incompetent may be

cause for cheer. So, too, may the fact that a free and fearless internet has shown up the censorship and bias of government-controlled media.

But democrats should be wary of what they wish for. Anwar has been fawned on by the liberal west since his sacking and jailing on trumped-up charges in 1999; his name was even connected with the job of UN secretary general. But the company he keeps deserves to stem the tide of sycophancy. His opposition coalition includes an Islamic fundamentalist party, PAS, that approves of amputation for thieves and thinks there are lessons to be learned from Hezbollah. Previously in control of only rural Kelantan, where it required women to wear headscarves, instituted separate lines at supermarkets for men and women, and banned gambling, nightclubs and rock concerts, PAS will now be in charge of two more states.

Further success would be disastrous for a country that has been both a Muslim state and a multiracial, multi-religious democracy since independence – a record no other can match (Turkey is a secular, not an Islamic, state) – and in which sharia courts only have jurisdiction over Muslims, and even then strictly for marriage, divorce and so on.

Any advance by PAS, whose constituency is almost entirely Malay (Malays make up the vast majority of Muslims), may be a

sign of a healthy electoral process, but is a setback for Buddhists, Hindus, Confucians, Christians and animists, for Chinese, Indians and indigenous tribes – for anyone who does not sign up to PAS's hardline agenda. Proponents of liberal democracy so eager for Anwar should realise that he is playing a dangerous game, one that could result in increased democracy but a reduction in liberty. The west needs to think long and hard about just who its friends should be in a region that contains more Muslims than the entire Arab Middle East. If the day comes when it rues having spurned the more pluralistic and liberal managed democracy of Dr Mahathir in favour of so-called reformers who ally themselves with medieval theocrats, it will almost certainly be too late. ●

## FUNDING

# Save the Sisters

*Aditi Charanji*

For nearly 30 years, Southall Black Sisters (SBS) has been synonymous with black British feminism and activism. Since it was founded in 1979, it has fought against domestic violence, suicide and self-harm, rape and sexual abuse, immigration difficulties ▶

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*Simon Rudd*

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