

Mahathir concerned over losses in upcoming Malaysian election

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The campaign for the November 29 election in Malaysia was formally launched on Sunday. While it is likely that the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition will be re-elected, there are growing concerns within government circles at the extent of opposition to its rule.

Barisan Nasional is comprised of 14 parties, headed by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and has held office continuously since formal independence in 1957. In the 1995 election, BN parties polled 65 percent of the vote and won 166 out of 192 seats in the national parliament. They also hold government in 13 of Malaysia's 14 states.

Opposing it is an unstable four-party opposition coalition, the Alternative Front, comprised of the rural-based Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS); the Democratic Action Party (DAP); the Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian Peoples Party); and the Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party), formed by Wan Azizah, the wife of jailed former finance minister and deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim.

The election has the form of a bitter and very public brawl between rival wings of the Malaysian business and political elite, each seeking to use appeals to the population to shore up their position.

Behind its professions of concern over corruption and democracy, the Alternative Front has come together to pursue the agenda of economic restructuring advocated by Anwar, sections of Malaysian big business and the International Monetary Fund during the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis. This restructuring would have meant an end to the preferential treatment given to various Malay business figures and corporations closely associated with the government and Mahathir's family. If the IMF program had been implemented, crippled Malaysian firms would have failed as restrictions on foreign ownership were lifted and the economy opened to further international competition.

In a series of bitter clashes within UMNO and the government, Mahathir succeeded in mobilising the majority of the regime against the IMF agenda and in defence of his business associates. Investment and currency controls were implemented to prevent capital leaving Malaysia and the banking sector was instructed to increase lending. When Anwar refused to resign, he was sacked, expelled from UMNO with his supporters and subsequently arrested.

Anwar was jailed for six years in April after being found guilty of dubious corruption charges and was placed on trial again in June to answer equally dubious charges of sexual misconduct. In the midst of falling living standards for wide layers of the Malaysian population and increasing political discontent, his fate has been presented by his supporters as a symbol of the lack of democracy and the injustice, corruption and nepotism that permeates the political system.

The same day the election was announced, Anwar's trial was postponed indefinitely, ostensibly because the judge is suffering severe back pains. A spokesman for Keadilan stated: "It is not surprising, considering they do not want him to be seen in public during the election period." Anwar withdrew his candidature in the elections saying that the government would use his conviction to bar him from parliament.

The Alternative Front has agreed on an electoral pact under which only one candidate from member parties contests each constituency, with the aim of winning at least 65 of the seats in Malaysia's parliament. This would see BN retain government, but without the two-thirds majority necessary for constitutional change that it has had for 30 years. Such a result will be popularly interpreted as a major blow to the regime.

A survey by the *Star* newspaper indicated that this could indeed occur. Of those who had made up their mind, the BN parties polled 63 percent, PAS, 21 percent, Keadilan,

6 percent and DAP, 5 percent. But 43 percent of those questioned had not yet decided how they would vote.

The ethnic breakdown of the poll already pointed to a strengthening of the Islamic PAS. Among ethnic Malay voters, who make up some 58 percent of the population and who are the base of support for UMNO, BN parties polled 52 percent, while PAS polled 33 percent.

It appears likely that seats will fall to PAS in predominantly Malay states in the largely rural north and east. As well as seeking to win the bulk of national electorates in these areas, PAS, which already holds government in the state of Kelantan, is aiming to take government in three other states, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis. Alongside elections for the national parliament, voting will take place for 11 of Malaysia's 14 state parliaments.

PAS, which advocates establishing an Islamic state with religious law, is conducting a campaign aimed at exploiting the concern felt by many people over the jailing of Anwar and other abuses of power by government figures, as well as the gap between rich and poor. PAS material refers to Mahathir as the "worst of the Pharaohs" and "most cruel". PAS leader Fadzil Noor declared: "Many people have no house but he [Mahathir] has a palace."

The Islamic movement has been able to rely upon a layer of Muslim clerics to propagate its message. In explaining why he had called the election before the start of the holy month of Ramadan in December, Mahathir stated that "certain elements" would have used the mosques to "campaign, slander and lie". The regime is alarmed enough at their influence that it has been considering a law banning people attending prayers outside of their neighbourhood, to try and prevent certain mosques becoming a centre for anti-government agitation. Mahathir's own electorate is in the state of Kedah.

UMNO has dispatched some 20,000 members from across Malaysia to campaign in the northern states. But the north is not the only area of concern. Keadilan may win a group of predominantly Malay seats elsewhere for the opposition. Wan Azizah will be standing in Anwar's former constituency of Permatang Pauh where there is considerable outrage at his imprisonment. Keadilan has also targeted seats held by one-time supporters of Anwar who sided with Mahathir last year. As in the north, the opposition is campaigning aggressively against government abuse of power.

For their part, Mahathir and BN are seeking to colour the defence of certain Malay big business interests with

nationalist and anti-American rhetoric, and warnings that any weakening of the strong central government could see Malaysia plunged into political and economic instability.

At an UMNO youth conference last weekend Mahathir declared: "We do not want a government that is the choice of [US vice president] Al Gore. We do not want a government that is controlled by foreign powers or one controlled by the IMF. We want a government of our own choice". The BN platform for the election is entitled "Malaysia, Free, United, Successful".

The government is seeking to open up an obvious schism in the opposition coalition between PAS and its partner DAP, which is based among ethnic Chinese who are opposed to PAS's plans for an Islamic state. BN has warned that a strengthening of Islamic fundamentalism threatens a surge in ethnic tensions, as has happened in Indonesia. It is particularly directed at Malaysia's Chinese and also Indian communities, who comprise some 45 percent of the population.

The president of the Malaysian Chinese Association, the second largest party in the Barisan Nasional coalition, called for a vote against DAP on the grounds that "one vote for the DAP is one vote for PAS". The impact of such agitation was reflected in last week's poll, which put support for BN among ethnic Chinese at 74 percent and 91 percent among ethnic Indians. The DAP, which faces great difficulties in holding its existing eight seats let alone winning more, has described this election as a "do-or-die battle."

The course of the campaign makes clear the dangers for the working class in Malaysia. Whatever the result on November 29, the rift within the ruling elite is likely to deepen. But bereft of any organisation that advances their interests against both the Mahathir and Anwar camps, there is a risk that the frustrations and concerns of the masses will be diverted into various religious, ethnic and regional disputes.



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