

Mahathir calls early election in Malaysia

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Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad announced yesterday that he would dissolve parliament today and hold a snap election before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins in the second week of December. The ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its coalition parties have been in "election mode" since at least June in anticipation of the widely predicted poll.

The ruling 14-party Barisan Nasional coalition holds a huge parliamentary advantage after winning 80 percent of the seats in the 1995 elections and capturing all but one of the 14 state governments—the northeast state of Kelantan where the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) is in control.

Mahathir had been toying with the idea of an early poll for months in order to take advantage of a relatively buoyant economy, which is forecast to grow by at least 4 percent this year and 5 percent in the year 2000, following last year's devastating contraction of 7.5 percent. With inflation down, exports up and positive growth, Mahathir has been able to crow about the effectiveness of the capital and monetary controls he put in place last September against the strong advice of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). "No one anywhere has concluded that our currency measures have been a spectacular failure," he told the World Economic Forum's East Asia Economic Summit in Singapore at the end of October.

Mahathir has also appealed to Malaysian nationalism by opposing the interference of the IMF and those like the international speculator George Soros who demanded a further opening up of the Malaysian economy to foreign investment. He attacked US vice-president Al Gore for his remarks at last November's APEC summit supporting Malaysian anti-government protests in support of sacked and jailed former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. More recently Mahathir stridently blamed Western nations for pushing for a UN

referendum on East Timor, which he said would have been better off as part of Indonesia.

The opposition coalition includes PAS, Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Rakyat Malaysia and the Parti Keadilan Nasional, formed earlier in the year by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. The DAP denounced the early poll as "scandalous" and called on the electoral commission to ensure a three-week campaign period. There can be a little as 11 days between the dissolution of parliament and the polling day—four days for nominations and six days for the campaign.

The government last month brought down a budget laced with handouts to woo voters—a 10 percent wage rise for government employees, increased government spending on health, education and farming, an across-the-board cut in income tax of 1 percent and \$US1.3 billion in new infrastructure spending to boost the road and construction industries.

Despite Mahathir's electoral preparations there are a number of indications that beneath the solid exterior the ruling coalition and UMNO in particular are in political difficulties following the sacking and expulsion of Anwar and his supporters, and Anwar's trial on trumped-up charges of corruption and sexual misconduct.

An article in the *Asiaweek* magazine on October 22 entitled "The Guessing Game: Malaysia is kept on tenterhooks over the elections" made the following observation concerning the UMNO Supreme Council Meeting on October 9:

"But insiders say that the mood was slightly less confident during the meeting. *Asiaweek* has learned that when presenting their 'election readiness' reports, most delegates indicated that they could not guarantee an overwhelming victory for Barisan... Some of the delegates reported that a significant number of voters remain unconvinced about the guilt of Anwar, who has been convicted of corruption and is now on trial for

sodomy... The reports have led the Supreme Council to launch a campaign to counter what Mahathir calls *fitnah* (slander) against the party.”

Like the case against Anwar, the new campaign is transparently contrived. In late October, former assistant central bank governor Abdul Murad Khalid held a news conference to make allegations that Anwar had used his position as finance minister for personal gain. Khalid is facing charges himself of failing to declare company assets—a fact which may well have been used to pressure him into making the latest accusations against Anwar at least a year after events. Predictably the claims have received saturation coverage in the press, which is largely controlled by the government and UMNO.

After the UMNO Supreme Council, Mahathir called on the party to “expose all the lies told by the opposition” but then added rather bitterly, “These people are so gullible. They are willing to believe anything”. The problem for Mahathir, however, is not that voters are “gullible” but rather that the sacking of Anwar and his trial have generated widespread and persistent distrust in the government despite its monopolisation of the media.

UMNO relies heavily on an electoral gerrymander heavily weighted in favour of rural Malay electorates where the party's social base resides. But it faces losses in these areas both to PAS, its traditional opponent, and to the newly formed Parti Keadilan Nasional. An *Asiaweek* article in the November 5 issue noted: “Given the generally smaller size of those rural constituencies, slight shifts in voter preference could lead to large changes in seats. ‘If that is so,’ says former opposition parliamentarian Kua Kia Soong, ‘the ruling party could find that the gerrymandering has gone against them.’”

A report in the November 4 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* indicates that the Anwar case has created considerable ferment among university students despite draconian laws—implemented by Mahathir as education minister during the 1970s—barring political activity. Students are agitating against the legislation and the government. National Union of Malaysian Islamic Students Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki said: “We can hardly see any government supporters at our university at all.” He estimated that between 70 and 90 percent of students are against the Mahathir government.

One of Mahathir's considerations in calling an early

election is that an estimated 650,000 young voters, registered since the last polls, become eligible to vote after next January.

Despite the government's boasting about an economic recovery, workers have been hit by the Asian economic crisis and high prices for imported goods. Plantation workers, who are largely ethnic Indians, are demanding that a minimum wage be introduced to replace their daily rates. According to one opposition spokesman, the wages of plantation workers have not kept pace with inflation.

Moreover, the disaffection with the government could intensify if the optimistic economic forecasts prove to be wrong. Malaysia's economic growth is largely the product of government spending and the financial system is still burdened with bad debts. Economic commentator David Roche observed in a recent article in *Time* magazine entitled “Lessons never learned”: “[T]his is a false boom, in no way underpinned by the factors that make sustainable economic growth possible—namely balanced budgets, transparent financial institutions and an efficient allocation of resources. Mahathir's Miracle is just another financial-credit bubble, doomed to burst in a couple of years at most.”

So, for Mahathir, the timing of the election has been crucial. It is not just a question of winning the election, which is highly likely given the gerrymander that has kept UMNO in power continuously since 1957. Nor as some commentators have suggested, is the government just concerned over retaining the two-thirds of parliamentary seats necessary for constitutional change.

More fundamentally, what Mahathir and his cronies are worried about, even if they cling to government, is that a major electoral reversal will fuel further opposition among students, workers and layers of the middle class and demands for democratic rights and improved living conditions.



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