Malaysian PM dissolves parliament for national election

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Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak yesterday dissolved the national parliament, paving the way for elections for a new national parliament and legislatures in 12 of the country's 13 states. The Election Commission is yet to announce an election date, but it is widely expected to be later this month, ensuring a short campaign.

For the first time since formal independence from Britain in 1957, Najib's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which dominates the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, could lose power to the opposition Peoples Alliance (PR).

In announcing the election on national television, Najib urged the country's 13.3 million voters not to "gamble the future of your children and Malaysia" on a vote for the opposition. At the same time, he promised: "If there is change in power, it will happen peacefully. This is our commitment."

UMNO, which dominates the media and the state apparatus, and has close connections to business cronies, is notorious for the police-state measures it has used against its opponents. However, its grip on power has been undermined by widespread hostility, especially among young people, to its anti-democratic methods and blatant discrimination against the country's substantial ethnic Chinese and Indian communities.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim declared that the PR coalition offered "the best possible chance to offer a viable alternative for democracy and a more responsible government." He said the opposition's chances of winning were "very good" but warned that the government could "resort to fraud during the polls and violence in the run up to the elections."

The PR is a three-party coalition, comprised of Anwar's Malay-based Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan), the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). In the previous election in 2008, it won 82 seats in the 222-seat national parliament, depriving the government of the two-thirds majority needed to change the country's constitution. The PR also won office in five states and has retained power in four, including the three most economically important states.

Najib was installed as UMNO leader in 2009 amid bitter recriminations over the substantial election losses, which were blamed on his predecessor, Abdullah Badawi. Last month, former prime minister and UMNO leader Mahathir Mohamad warned Najib, not for the first time, that he could face a revolt inside UMNO if he did not better, or at least equal, the 2008 result.

Opinion polls in Malaysia are particularly unreliable, but they do point to a close election. A recent survey by the University of Malaya put BN support at 42 percent, with the PR on 37 percent and 21 percent undecided. An earlier Merdeka Centre poll in February showed Najib's popularity down and his coalition on 45 percent support. Some analysts suggest that the election could be decided by the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak.

UMNO has used every method to undermine the opposition. Anwar was charged and put on trial in 2010 on trumped-up charges of sodomy in an attempt to destabilise the PR coalition. He finally was acquitted last year. Najib has also cracked down on large protests that called for reform of the country's electoral system, which is gerrymandcered to favour UMNO's rural Malay base and leaves the door open for ballot rigging.

Over the past year, the government has sought to undercut opposition support with a series of cosmetic

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"democratic reforms" and handouts. Najib has given nearly $US2 billion to poor families, aimed at securing the votes of rural households and ethnic Indian workers, who deserted the ruling coalition in droves in 2008.

On the day before dissolving parliament, Najib announced bonuses of $US400 for each of the 40,000 employees of the national oil firm Petronas. Similar handouts were made in recent days to thousands of workers in other government-linked firms. Last month, he granted pay rises to the country's 230,000 military and police personnel.

The opposition PR is also promising handouts, including cheaper utility bills and lower petrol prices. Anwar is making a particular appeal to the three million young voters, or 22 percent of the electorate, who are generally hostile to the government and avoid the UMNO-dominated media in favour of the Internet and social media. The opposition has promised free university education in its election manifesto.

The opposition does not represent the interests of working people, however. Rather it is based on layers of the ruling elite that regard UMNO's support for crony Malay businesses and its failure to enact pro-market restructuring as an obstacle to foreign investment and an impediment to local capital.

Anwar began his political career as an UMNO youth leader and rose through its ranks to become finance minister and deputy prime minister under Mahathir Mohamad. He has a long record of supporting all its anti-democratic measures and discriminatory policies.

Anwar fell out with Mahathir and UMNO in the midst of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, when he proposed to implement the International Monetary Fund's demands to open up the Malaysian economy. Mahathir bitterly opposed the measures that would have hit UMNO's cronies, sacked Anwar and implemented capital controls.

UMNO's ruthlessness was demonstrated in what followed. Mahathir expelled Anwar and his supporters from the party. When the former deputy prime minister organised anti-government protests, he was arrested, physically beaten by the country's police chief and detained without charge under the Internal Security Act. He was finally tried on bogus corruption and sodomy charges, found guilty and jailed.

In 2004, the Federal Court overturned the sodomy charges, declaring that the original conviction was based on "unreliable" evidence. The court decision—like Anwar's acquittal on similar charges last year—was an indication of shifting support within ruling circles.

Despite efforts by UMNO to implement limited pro-market measures and ease discrimination in favour of Malay businesses, sections of big business are increasingly frustrated with the government policies. While Malaysian gross domestic product (GDP) grew at 5.6 percent in 2012, there are growing fears over the impact of the global economic crisis on Malaysian exports and foreign direct investment. Investment inflows are well short of the government's targets for its $444 billion 2020 "transformation" agenda.

At the same time, big business is pressing for a winding back of public spending rather than election handouts. Government debt already stands at 53 percent of GDP. Because of his record, Anwar is regarded by many within ruling circles as the best means for encouraging foreign investment and implementing a harsh austerity agenda. Despite its current posturing as "democrats," the opposition, should it come to power, will not hesitate to use police-state measures against protests and resistance by workers and youth.

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