

Malaysia's opposition coalition breaks apart

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The leaders of two of the three constituent parties of the opposition Malaysian People's Alliance (PR)—the People's Justice Party (Keadilan) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP)—have announced the breakup of the coalition.

On June 16, Lim Guan Eng, DAP secretary general and chief minister in the PR-controlled state of Penang, said his party would no longer work with the PR's third party, Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), and the PR therefore "ceases to exist." The next day, Keadilan president Wan Azizah Wan Ismail said the PR "no longer functions formally."

The collapse of the three-party pact changes the official political landscape in Malaysia.

The PR's gains in the 2008 and 2013 national elections challenged the stranglehold that the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government, led by the monolithic United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), has held since independence from Britain in 1957. UMNO exercises tight control over the state apparatus, judiciary and media. Its rule protects the ethnic Malay capitalist class and is maintained by a race-based political system that discriminates against the ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

The PR, led by the now re-imprisoned Anwar Ibrahim, represented a faction of the ruling elite, marginalised from power by UMNO and threatened by the restraining effect on economic growth of the regime's "crony capitalism." The three-party grouping was able to exploit the popular hostility to UMNO's authoritarianism, corruption and racism. In 2013, the PR won 51 percent of the vote to the BN's 47 percent, but won only 89 of 222 parliamentary seats because of a long-standing gerrymandering of electorate boundaries.

The PR's breakup was precipitated by the decisions of the Islamist PAS leadership at its general assembly on June 4-6.

The contentious issue first pursued was PAS's policy of allowing Muslim sharia courts in the rural Kelantan state, where it holds government, to impose the barbaric *hudud* criminal code. This provides for punishments such as stoning to death for adultery and apostasy and amputation for theft, and is opposed by PAS's partners.

The real issue fought out at the general assembly, however, was not the *hudud* question in Kelantan state, but factional control over PAS. PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang and the ultra-right wing he represents, composed of Muslim scholars, teachers and clerics, moved to strip the "moderates" led by the now deposed deputy president Mohamad Sabu of any influence in the organisation.

Mohamad Sabu's group, which presented itself as the "professional" and "progressive" element of PAS, campaigned on the basis that Malaysia was not ready for *hudud* and that the crucial question was PAS's cooperation with the PR. Sabu said: "PAS must stay in the PR coalition."

Hadi labelled his opponents in PAS as "lackeys of DAP," underlying his thinly disguised anti-Chinese Malay chauvinism. His faction stood candidates for every post, from president on down, and won 22 of the 23 positions on the national working committee. It then used its majority to push through a vote to cut ties with DAP, with no debate.

Hadi's faction received strong support from UMNO-controlled media outlets for pushing toward the breakup of the opposition coalition. Prime Minister Najib Razak has been under enormous pressure since the 2013 election debacle. He attempted to shore up his position by making overtures to PAS's Islamist wing, which has always been uneasy about aligning with secular parties, particularly the non-Muslim Chinese DAP. Hadi responded by publicly defending Najib when he came under criticism last August by former

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

On June 18, Najib's government allowed Abdul Hadi to have an amendment to the sharia courts' law put on parliament's order paper. DAP's parliamentary leader, Lim Kit Siang, denounced the decision as the PAS president's reward for "his change of political posture, where UMNO was referred to in very respectful terms, while DAP is demonised with rough language."

Lim noted that Najib's government had no intention of pushing the *hudud* law, as it needs the support of the 48 BN parliamentary members from Sabah and Sarawak, where the non-Muslim BN parties oppose the measures. PAS strategist Zuhdi Marzuk has called for UMNO to break with such parties and form a new ruling coalition that involves only Malay Muslim organisations.

The splits, manoeuvring and realignments underway testify to the political instability developing in Malaysia.

The now defunct PR, formed in 2008 after Anwar Ibrahim founded Keadilan, was always an unstable amalgam of differing sections of the ruling elite, whose only common cause was opposition to BN rule. Anwar, then deputy UMNO leader and deputy prime minister and finance minister, broke with UMNO and Prime Minister Mahathir after the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Anwar opposed Mahathir's protectionist measures and championed the Washington-backed International Monetary Fund's demands for the government to deregulate the economy and open it up for the unfettered operation of foreign capital.

Mahathir, determined to politically destroy Anwar, had him arrested and jailed on frame-up sodomy and corruption charges. Anwar was released in 2006, when the sodomy charges were overturned. After the 2008 electoral gains by the PR, Najib initiated new charges, which ultimately resulted in Anwar being jailed again in February this year.

Najib established close ties with Washington by collaborating with its anti-China "pivot" to Asia. This assisted UMNO to recover from its devastating election results in 2013. His government brushed aside mass anti-government rallies of that year, after US President Obama endorsed Najib's electoral win. Obama gave de facto US support to the increasingly vicious repression of the opposition through the use of the Sedition Act.

Any comfort Najib takes from the breakup of the

opposition coalition will be short-lived. On June 15, he described the economic "headwinds" buffeting Malaysia. He referred to "geopolitical tensions," the slowing of growth in China, falling commodity prices for the oil and gas that provide 30 percent of government revenue, uncertainty over US interest rates, volatile money markets and a regionally high household debt of 87.6 percent of gross domestic product. Najib warned of major impacts on economic growth, the national currency, capital flows, the current account balance and government spending.

Najib is also under attack from Mahathir Mohamad for signing up to the Obama administration's Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP is designed to subordinate the Asia-Pacific region to US-determined rules of trade and investment (see: "Malaysian prime minister under pressure over US-led economic pact"). Mahathir, speaking for UMNO-linked business interests that could be threatened, has denounced the pact and asserted that it will make Malaysia a US colony.

Well aware of the deep divisions within the ruling class and the increasing social tensions, UMNO's only answer is to attempt to further divide the working class and society as a whole along racial lines.

For its part, the opposition is seeking to assemble a new coalition. In a message relayed from prison by his lawyers, Anwar promised to build a "stronger and enduring partnership." PAS dissidents, grouped in the PasMa non-government organisation, have said they will support the formation of a new Islamic party that will work with DAP and Keadilan.



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