Malaysian opposition chooses autocratic Mahathir as top candidate

John Roberts
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Mahathir Mohamad, the 92-year-old former Malaysian prime minister, was chosen on January 7 by the opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), as its top candidate in this year's national elections. If PH wins, Mahathir will become prime minister, a post he occupied from 1981 to 2003.

Prime Minister Najib Razak must call an election by August 24, but it is widely expected earlier. Najib heads the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant party in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) government.

The opposition's endorsement of Mahathir as its lead candidate is an extraordinary about-face that underscores its utterly opportunist politics.

From 1993 to 1998, PH de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim was Mahathir's deputy in UMNO, also deputy prime minister and finance minister. In 1998, amid the political turmoil following the Asian economic crisis of 1997, Anwar fell out with Mahathir over the direction of economy policy.

Mahathir expelled Anwar and his supporters from the government and UMNO. When Anwar launched a nationwide campaign of protest rallies over government corruption, Mahathir had his former deputy arrested under the country's draconian Internal Security Act. Held incommunicado, Anwar was bashed so severely that he sustained lifelong injuries. He was then charged, tried and jailed on trumped-up charges of corruption and sodomy.

Yet the PH delegates at its convention, held in the Selangor state capital of Shah Alam, voted unanimously on January 7 for Mahathir to head the coalition. If PH wins the election, Mahathir has agreed to seek a pardon for Anwar and step aside if that takes place. Anwar is due to be released from prison in June, but without a pardon will be barred from any political involvement.

The four PH parties consist of Mahathir's United Malaysian Indigenous Party (PPBM), formed in 2016 after he split from Najib and UMNO; Anwar's People's Justice Party (PKR); the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP); and Parti Amanah Negara, a breakaway from the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). PAS was formerly allied with the opposition coalition, but broke away in 2015.

The integration of Mahathir and PPBM into PH was formalised last June after days of tense wrangling. The key issue was what position Mahathir would have. Some delegates had pushed for him to be a special adviser, but Mahathir insisted on a leadership post.

Mahathir argued the four parties needed to unite to remove Najib. He emphasised Najib's involvement in the 1Malaysia Development Fund (1MDB) scandal, in which up to $US6 billion went missing, including hundreds of millions that international investigators claim went into Najib's personal accounts.

Mahathir declared that PPBM could deliver ethnic Malay votes from UMNO and PAS. UMNO has ruled over Malaysia since formal independence from Britain in 1957. It has pursued an aggressive policy of discriminating in favour of the country's Malay majority in jobs, business and education at the expense of ethnic Chinese and Indians.

Mahathir remains a vehement proponent of this racialist New Economic Policy and speaks for layers of Malay crony capitalists that have benefitted from it. He ousted Anwar in 1998 precisely because Anwar was advocating the opening up the Malaysian economy to foreign investment that could have bankrupted such Malay businesses.

Nevertheless, during an opposition convention last June, Anwar intervened in the debate with a message

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from prison arguing that PH “should benefit from the position and role of Mahathir.” Anwar insisted that, in “amassing all the strengths in a team to go up against” UMNO’s BN coalition, it was “fair to ensure the participation of all leaders effectively.”

In the end, Anwar was elected PH *ketu umum* or de facto leader, Mahathir was elected chairman and Anwar’s wife and PH parliamentary leader Wan Azizah became coalition president.

At this month’s opposition convention, Anwar sent another message, read by his daughter Nuril Izzah, emphasising his support for the decision to nominate Mahathir as the opposition’s prime ministerial candidate. In part, this message sought to quell resentment and opposition within the opposition ranks.

The alliance with Mahathir is based on the crude electoral calculation that he can deliver a sizeable vote from disaffected Malays. DAP leader Lim Kit Siang, whose party had for decades been the target of Mahathir’s anti-Chinese chauvinism, heralded the formation of his PPBM as a “game changer”.

One DAP leader has calculated that at least 40 of UMNO’s ruling BN coalition’s peninsular seats are vulnerable. The convention on January 7 agreed to allocate the largest number of peninsula seats, 52, to Mahathir’s party, with Anwar’s PKR receiving 51; DAP 35 and Parti Amanah Negara 27.

At the last national election in 2013, the opposition coalition won the popular vote but failed to gain enough seats to form government due to widespread fraud and blatant gerrymander. Najib and UMNO were clearly shaken by the result and have used every dirty trick in the book to undermine the opposition.

Najib, following Mahathir’s example, had Anwar re-arrested in 2008 on bogus charges of sodomy. Anwar was tried and, after a lengthy legal battle, finally jailed in 2014. Najib helped engineer the breakaway of PAS from the opposition, and undermined the opposition’s control of several state governments.

At the same time, however, Najib adapted to the opposition’s policies, easing restrictions of foreign investment, and softening the discrimination against non-Malays. He also sought to undercut international support for the opposition by cautiously endorsing President Barack Obama’s “pivot to Asia” against China, including the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership.

When Obama visited Malaysia in 2015, he ignored the imprisoned Anwar. Washington’s ties with Najib have continued under Trump, who welcomed Najib to Washington last year and made no mention of the 1MDB scandal that wracked Najib’s government.

It was Najib’s economic concessions to the US that primarily lay behind Mahathir’s break with UMNO. Mahathir and his party remain deeply opposed to any policies that undermine the dominant economic and political position of the Malay ruling elites. Thus, they are hostile to the political program for which Anwar and his opposition coalition have campaigned. As a result, the opposition alliance is inherently unstable.

There is no doubt bitter resentment toward Mahathir in the opposition’s ranks. Significantly, after he was installed as prime ministerial candidate, the Selangor branch of Anwar’s PKR refused to sign a formal declaration that stressed “our unwavering support towards all declarations made during the convention.” Selangor is Malaysia’s most economically important state, producing 22.6 percent of the gross domestic product, and a centre of corporate support for Anwar’s advocacy of pro-market “reforms.”

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