

Malaysian parliament dissolved for snap general election

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Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's government dissolved the national parliament last Saturday, setting the stage for an early general election. Yesterday, the Election Commission (EC) fixed May 9 as polling day. Twelve of the 13 state assemblies will be dissolved for state elections on the same day.

The decision puts the polling day ahead of the Muslim Ramadan that begins in mid-May and well before jailed opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim is due to be released in June. Anwar was convicted and jailed in 2015 on trumped-up sodomy charges.

Since formal independence from Britain in 1957, Malaysia has been a virtual one-party state. Najib's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), along with its coalition partners in the Barisan Nasional (BN), has ruled continuously.

The regime was designed, above all, to serve the interests of the ethnic Malay ruling elites that back UMNO, as well as business cronies represented by UMNO's main coalition partners in the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress.

At the last general election in 2013, BN lost the popular vote for the first time to the opposition coalition led by Anwar. BN still won a majority in the 222-seat national parliament, due to an electoral gerrymander, but lost its two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution.

Over the past five years, Najib has pulled out all stops to politically undermine the opposition parties, including through the jailing of Anwar. Najib has called the snap election and instituted further measures to rig the election in BN's favour. His own position will be in doubt if BN suffers another poor result.

Najib faces the prospect of fresh investigations into the 1MDB state development fund scandal if the

opposition parties take office. At least \$US4.5 billion disappeared from the fund. International investigations suggest that hundreds of millions went into Najib's personal accounts.

Malaysia's government-controlled media has all but buried the scandal. In addition, Najib's cautious support for Washington's anti-China policy has ensured there has been limited international pressure on the issue.

Before calling the election, the government moved on multiple fronts.

On March 28, the parliament voted 129 to 80 to approve the new electoral boundaries drawn up by the EC. A new electoral law had faced legal challenges and protests, but the EC received the go-ahead from the Appeals Court last December.

The law manipulates electorates. Pro-opposition voters are bundled into larger electorates, while pro-government voters are in far smaller ones. The new boundaries give an enormous advantage to the BN in at least a third of the 222 federal seats and six state assemblies, according to various analysts.

The average size of a constituency normally won by the BN has now shrunk to 48,000 voters, whereas those associated with opposition victories average 79,000.

The EC paid particular attention to Selangor, the most powerful economic state, where the opposition won the federal vote as well as control of the state government in 2013. The largest opposition seat of Damansara has 150,439 voters, while the smallest, the BN seat of Sabak Bernam, has just 37,216.

Shahrul Aman, head of the electoral reform group Bersih, told the *Guardian* that by gerrymandering the popular vote, the government could retain power with as little as 16.5 percent of the vote.

Another measure, enacted on April 2, is a "fake

news” law that takes censorship to a new level. Punishments for circulating fake news have been set at 500,000 ringgit (\$123,000) and a maximum of six years in jail. The government already has in place sedition and criminal defamation laws that have been used to prosecute opposition figures and journalists.

A Human Rights Watch report last month pointed out that the new law sets no standards to determine what is false and makes no distinction between malicious acts or mistakes. It is in effect left to the government and security apparatus to determine what is “fake” and to charge anyone they wish.

In a third move against the opposition, the Registrar of Societies (RoS) deregistered the United Malaysian Indigenous Party (PPBM) for at least 30 days on spurious technical grounds. The PPBM was formed by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who joined the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH) and is its prime ministerial candidate.

The ban will become permanent if the party fails to submit paperwork from the party’s December annual meeting. The ban is designed to undermine PH, which counted on the Malay chauvinist PPBM to attract votes from UMNO’s traditional ethnic Malay Muslim base.

The RoS is using the PPBM ruling to refuse to register the PH as a formal coalition. If the PPBM ban stays in place, Mahathir and other PPBM candidates will be prohibited from referring to themselves as party members.

The PH was formed after the collapse of the opposition People’s Alliance (PR) coalition that contested the 2013 election. The PR consisted of Anwar’s urban ethnic Malay-based Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan), the ethnic-Chinese based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the rural-based Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). UMNO exploited the racist and religious card to encourage the PAS leaders to leave the PR in 2015.

The new opposition PH coalition initially consisted of Keadilan, the DAP and PAS breakaway Parti Amanah Negara, which then joined with Mahathir’s PPBM—a breakaway from UMNO—on the basis of campaigning to remove Najib. It is a highly unstable political formation.

Mahathir and Anwar have sharp political differences, particularly over economic policy. In the midst of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, Mahathir, who was then

prime minister, sacked Anwar, his deputy and finance minister, and expelled him and his supporters from UMNO. When Anwar initiated anti-corruption protests, he was arrested and eventually jailed on phony charges.

Mahathir was bitterly opposed to Anwar’s promotion of the International Monetary Fund agenda of opening up the Malaysian economy, which threatened UMNO’s business cronies. Mahathir’s attack on Najib has been on the same basis: that he has made too many pro-market concessions. Mahathir also remains committed to discrimination against the country’s ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities as the means to ensure the economic and political dominance of the Malay elites.

As part of the coalition deal, the PPBM was awarded 52 of the coalition’s candidacies. If the new coalition wins, Mahathir has promised to pardon Anwar, allowing him to become prime minister. Because the underlying differences remain, there is no guarantee that the promises will be kept, or that the PH coalition will stay intact.



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