

After a protracted delay, full Malaysian ministry sworn in

Peter Symonds
3 July 2018

The May 9 general election in Malaysia ended six decades of rule by right-wing, autocratic governments dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). While the victory of the opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) has raised high hopes, the new administration of 92-year-old Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad is organically incapable of addressing the democratic aspirations and pressing social needs of working people.

The fact that it has taken nearly two months to assemble a full ministry, which was officially sworn in yesterday, is a sign of the deep, underlying divisions within the five-party ruling coalition. The first cabinet sworn in on May 21 comprised Mahathir and 13 ministers. Yesterday, another 13 ministers and 23 deputy ministers were officially appointed.

Mahathir, who was UMNO leader and prime minister from 1981 to 2003, only broke away from UMNO and formed the United Malaysian Indigenous Party (PPBM) in 2017 after bitterly attacking then prime minister Najib Razak over corruption and the 1Malaysia Development Bank (1MDB) scandal.

Mahathir and his PPBM joined the opposition coalition in January and he became its prime ministerial candidate on the basis of an opportunistic deal with its two main parties—the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the People's Justice Party (PKR) of jailed opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Under the arrangement, Mahathir, if he became prime minister, would seek a pardon for Anwar and would step aside after two years to allow Anwar to take the top job. While Anwar has now been freed, the composition of the new cabinet indicates that Mahathir intends to consolidate his grip on power, if not for himself personally, then for his allies.

Najib had jailed Anwar on trumped-up charges of

sodomy, but it was Mahathir who pioneered such methods. In the midst of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Mahathir expelled Anwar, then deputy prime minister and finance minister, and his supporters from UMNO after the two fell out over economic policy. When Anwar began a campaign of protests over government corruption, Mahathir had Anwar arrested, bashed and jailed on phony corruption and sodomy charges.

Despite claims that their feud is over, Mahathir and Anwar represent rival layers of the Malaysian ruling class. Mahathir is an advocate of protectionist measures and the so-called New Economic Policy designed to favour indigenous Malays in business, education and jobs over the substantial ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities. In 1998, Anwar advocated the International Monetary Fund's agenda of opening up the Malaysian economy to foreign investment and dismantling the regulatory measures upon which the Malay crony capitalists who had close relations with Mahathir relied.

Those fundamental differences remain. Mahathir can rely on his own PPBM, and in all likelihood, two other smaller parties in the ruling coalition—Amanah, which is a breakaway from the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) and the regionalist Warisan party based in Borneo. Anwar's PKR is more closely aligned with DAP—both have advocated an easing of the discriminatory policies favouring Malays and the promotion of a more multicultural Malaysia.

The new ministry is heavily skewed towards the Mahathir wing, which won only 32 seats—PPBM has 13, Amanah 11 and Warisan 8—but has a majority, 14 of the 27 cabinet positions and 11 of the 23 deputy ministers. By contrast, Anwar's PKR has 47 seats and DAP 42, or a total of 89 seats, but have only 13 cabinet posts and 12 deputy ministers.

Significantly Mahathir has ensured that the key home ministry, which supervises the courts and the police, has gone to one of his close supporters, Muhyiddin Yassin, who was Najib's deputy until 2016. During his two decades in power, Mahathir was ruthless in his use of police state methods, not only for crushing opposition parties and protests, but against rivals within UMNO—as was the case with Anwar. He will undoubtedly do so again as opposition emerges to the government and divisions in the ruling coalition sharpen.

As part of the pre-election deal, Mahathir has appointed Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, as deputy prime minister and also minister of women, family and community development. However, the two ministers at the prime minister's department, who will work closely with Mahathir, are from Amanah and Warisan. Mahathir has also appointed an Amanah member, Mohamed Sabu, to the sensitive post of defence minister.

The key economic posts have gone to DAP, whose Lim Guan Eng has become finance minister, and the PKR, whose Mohamed Azmin Ali is the new economic affairs minister. These two ministries could well become a battle-ground, especially if the economy is hit by the developing trade war between the US and its rivals, particularly China.

After leaving the post of foreign minister vacant in his first round of appointments in May, Mahathir has installed PKR member Saifuddin Abdullah to the position. Mahathir has effectively played the role of foreign minister over the past two months and is likely to try to dictate the agenda in the future.

In mid-June, Mahathir made his first trip overseas to Japan to seek investment to counter China's heavy involvement in the Malaysian economy, including infrastructure projects promoted by the Najib government under China's broad One Belt, One Road plan for integrating Eurasia. Mahathir has vowed to review all Chinese projects in Malaysia and any "unequal treaties" with China. At the same time, he met last month with Chinese billionaire and Alibaba founder Jack Ma, who visited Malaysia in part to try to ease relations between the two countries.

During his two decades in office, Mahathir exploited phony anti-colonial posturing, mixed with Malaysian nationalism and anti-Chinese chauvinism, to maintain

his political base of support, while manoeuvring between the major powers. He has already taken a shot at US President Donald Trump, declaring that he had no plans to go and see him. "I don't know how I can deal with a person who is so much like a chameleon," Mahathir said.

Within Malaysia, the new government is already hinting that it will wind back or ditch its election promises. Blaming the corruption of Najib, it has revealed that the national debt is far higher at \$250 billion or 80 percent of Malaysia's gross domestic product, than the \$170 billion assessed by the previous administration.

The new finance minister Lim declared last month: "They were just robbing the country blind. I'm having nightmares practically every day, wondering what land mines will I tread on the following day." In a similar vein, Mahathir declared: "All have been raped by the previous government. They have taken money. Now they have lost the money."

The *Financial Times* commented that Lim and economic affairs minister Azmin faced "a daunting task" in promising to clean up corruption and tackle spiralling debt—"while simultaneously shrinking revenues by abolishing a goods and services tax, increasing some fuel subsidies and dropping highway tolls." However, like its predecessor, the Mahathir government will tear up its pledges and ensure that it is working people who are compelled to bear the burden.

The hopes and aspirations of the millions who voted for the new government for democratic rights and improved living conditions will be rapidly dashed, setting the stage for a confrontation with the working class and rural poor.



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