

Malaysia's political crisis deepens as King declares new prime minister

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Over the past week, sections of the elite looking to continue a policy of race-based crony capitalism carried out a political coup in Malaysia as the ruling coalition collapsed in infighting and betrayals. Attempting to put an end to the machinations and impose a government by fiat, the Malaysian king declared one of the leading coup plotters, former Interior Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, as the new prime minister.

Muhyiddin, whose break with the Pakatan Harapan (PH) ruling coalition a week ago set the political crisis in motion, now stands at the head of an ethnic Malay political alliance that brings the widely detested United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) back to power. Mahathir Mohamad, who resigned as prime minister a week ago, is contesting the installment of Muhyiddin.

The crisis in Malaysia remains unresolved, but the illusions fostered in the 2018 election that hope and change could be achieved through Pakatan Harapan are shattered.

UMNO-led alliances ruled Malaysia from its formal independence in 1957 until it was ousted by Pakatan Harapan in 2018. Playing on anti-Chinese chauvinism, UMNO served the interests of a thin layer of Malay crony capitalists allied to the ruling coalition, through a range of monetary controls and preferential government subsidies.

Its leading representative was Mahathir Mohamad, prime minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003, who implemented the racist New Economic Policy which established preferences for Malays, who comprise a majority of the population. The policy covering jobs, business and education systematically discriminated against the country's substantial Indian and Chinese minorities.

The victory of Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) in the May 2018 election brought to power a multi-racial coalition, with the promise of putting an end to the discriminatory racial policies of UMNO and its Barisan Nasional coalition.

The current political crisis is the result of the unstable and unprincipled character of the PH, which brought together the ethnic Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the People's Justice Party (PKR) of Anwar Ibrahim with the United Malaysian Indigenous Party (Bersatu) of Mahathir.

In 1998, then Prime Minister Mahathir and his deputy Anwar had a vicious falling out as a result of the political turmoil in the country in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis. Mahathir had insisted on maintaining his policy of currency and capital controls to defend Malay capitalists, but Anwar, who was also finance minister, supported the IMF demands to open up the economy,

measures which would have bankrupted Mahathir's cronies.

Mahathir expelled Anwar, who responded by leading protests against the Prime Minister's corruption. Mahathir had Anwar arrested. He was savagely beaten by the police, causing him permanent physical harm, then tried and convicted on trumped-up charges of sodomy and corruption.

Support for the opposition parties of PKR and DAP grew, particularly among urban Malays based on the peninsula and among the ethnic Chinese. In the 2013 election the opposition won the popular vote, but lost the election as a result of a longstanding UMNO gerrymander. Najib Razak, who had become the head of UMNO, remained prime minister.

In 2016, under a great deal of pressure from Washington, Najib signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, which required him to carry out some liberalization measures. Mahathir, seeing in this an attack on his pro-Malay policies, broke with UMNO and founded a new party, Bersatu. However, Bersatu was an inadequate political vehicle for the national aspirations of Mahathir and he needed to form a new coalition to regain power.

As the 2018 elections approached, Najib and UMNO had become widely despised as a result of the 1MDB corruption scandal. Billions of dollars in government money had gone missing, and Najib was alleged to have personally pocketed hundreds of millions.

Under the leadership of Anwar, the PKR and DAP struck a devil's bargain with Mahathir to form the PH, making Mahathir their proposed Prime Minister. Mahathir, they calculated, would take Malay votes away from UMNO and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). As part of the bargain it was agreed that he would pardon Anwar, who had been convicted for a second time on bogus sodomy charges. This would pave the way for Anwar to return to parliament and take over as prime minister from the 92-year-old Mahathir half way through the term of office.

The majority of the votes secured by PH came from DAP and PKR, which received 89 seats compared to the 32 which went to Mahathir's allies, but Mahathir stacked his cabinet with a majority of people loyal to him. Among those he appointed from the DAP and PKR were Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng (DAP) and Minister of Economic Affairs Mohamed Azmin Ali (PKR). He made his ally in Bersatu, Muhyiddin Yassin, Interior Minister. Mahathir secured a pardon from the king for Anwar, and in October 2018 Anwar took office as an MP.

A significant factor contributing to the downfall of UMNO was

mass social anger at skyrocketing prices and low wages. The PH government entered office with great illusions, particularly among young people, that the new multi-racial coalition government would extend democratic rights and improve living conditions.

The coalition between Bersatu, looking to continue and expand policies of race-based cronyism, and DAP and the PKR, looking to implement IMF measures on the economy, was inherently unstable. None of the members of the coalition sought to defend the interests of the working population.

The alliance with Mahathir split the PKR. Anwar began pushing Mahathir more aggressively to honour his promise to step down. Mahathir was scheduled to step down in the latter half of 2020, but Anwar was demanding a firm timeline. Economic Affairs Minister Azmin began angling for control of the PKR. In 2019 a video of two men in bed was circulated on the internet and Azmin was accused of having sex with a man. Anwar, himself the victim of bogus sodomy charges, rather than defend Azmin publicly, suggested that he should resign. By December, their supporters were engaging in a massive brawl at the PKR youth congress.

Bersatu began to push back against the role played by the DAP Finance Minister, who was working to undo the race-based preferential policies of UMNO. Mahathir delivered a speech at the Malay Dignity Congress and openly played the race card claiming that it was Malay disunity that had allowed DAP—part of his own coalition—to take power.

On February 21, Bersatu threatened to pull out of the PH if Anwar continued to pressure Mahathir. Anwar backed down. Bersatu, the minority member of the PH, was looking to rule without the PKR or the DAP. Azmin reached out to Interior Minister Muhyiddin, offering the services of his faction of the PKR, in the formation of a new alliance.

On Sunday, February 23, they staged what the *Straits Times* called a series of “highly choreographed” meetings with UMNO and PAS. Bersatu, the PKR faction, UMNO and PAS would constitute a new majority and Azmin arranged for them to meet with the king to recognize their coalition with Mahathir as their head.

Mahathir, however, wanted nothing to do with UMNO and Najib Razak. Presented with Muhyiddin and Azmin’s coup, he resigned as head of Bersatu and as Prime Minister. Mahathir has a history of using dramatic resignations to mobilize support and maintain his hold on power.

Declaring that there thus was no government, the king installed Mahathir, the resigned Prime Minister, as interim Prime Minister. The king stated that he would poll the MPs to determine where the true majority lay. Mahathir sought to use his unelected office to hold together a government entirely loyal to him until the next election, and on Wednesday he held a press conference to declare his “non-partisan unity government.” Mahathir spoke minutes before Anwar staged a press conference to announce that he had secured the majority needed to form a government. Confronted with their rival claims, Anwar instructed everyone to abide by whatever decision the king would reach.

The king declared that his personal poll had been unable to discover a clear majority. Mahathir announced that he would call a special session of parliament to determine who in fact had a

majority. Everyone—Mahathir, Anwar, the king, the coup plotters—was scrambling to avoid calling an election.

On Friday the alliances shifted again. UMNO and Anwar—seeing the summoning of parliament as a means for Mahathir to stay in power—declared that his move was “unconstitutional” and “disrespectful to the king.” The parliamentary speaker declared Mahathir’s special session had not been legally summoned.

The Malaysian king is a sultan serving as the monarch on a rotational basis—every five years another one of the country’s nine sultans is made king. The current king summoned an emergency session of the “Conference of Rulers,” to consult with the other eight sultans, and then declared that he would meet with each of the party leaders to determine who had a majority.

As Mahathir refused to ally with UMNO, Muhyiddin put himself forward as the front man for the coup plotters, and with the backing of UMNO, PAS, Bersatu and Azmin’s section of the PKR he had the support of a total of 96 MPs, trumping Anwar’s 92.

The PH responded by abandoning Anwar on Saturday, hoping that if they restored Mahathir as Prime Minister that he would bring in the small parties of Sabah and Sarawak loyal to him and they would outnumber Muhyiddin. Anwar accepted his sidelining, declaring “I will be taking a step back ... so that we can avoid the country being further dragged into this power struggle and into an old system which has been rejected by the people.”

As Mahathir came forward to declare that the reconstituted PH had secured a majority, the king intervened, abruptly declaring that he had determined that Muhyiddin had a majority and swearing him in at 10.30 in the morning on Sunday March 1. The king issued a statement that “His Highness hopes this political crisis would end.” Najib Razak, disgraced head of UMNO, publicly extended his congratulations to Muhyiddin.

Whatever the immediate twists and turns, the political crisis in Malaysia will only sharpen. Every section of the ruling elite is engaged in a vicious, frantic game of political backstabbing. The machinations on all sides have a fundamentally authoritarian and anti-democratic character. Regardless of who wins out, the government that is being formed is in no way a reflection of the democratic will of the people, not even its limited and distorted expression in the 2018 elections.

Fuelling the desperate manoeuvres on all sides is the awareness in the ruling class of the mounting social anger in the working population of all races in Malaysia, amid an international resurgence of the class struggle and rapidly worsening crisis of the global economy. The ruling elites are engaged in a bitter struggle to defend their narrow interests and how best to suppress working class opposition.



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