

Malaysian king rejects PM's "request" for emergency rule

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On Sunday, Malaysia's King Sultan Abdullah rejected a request by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin for him to declare a state of emergency in response to a worsening coronavirus resurgence and "political instability." As a result, Muhyiddin could be forced to resign, throwing the country into further turmoil.

In Malaysia, like other states throughout southeast Asia, the political establishment is facing a severe economic breakdown, the intensifying US confrontation with China and rising unemployment, poverty and class tensions.

The pandemic is accelerating the protracted breakup of the old political parties, especially the corrupt and repressive United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which ran the country from the end of British rule in 1957 until it was defeated at a general election in May 2018.

Both Muhyiddin's bid to rule by decree and the monarch's rejection point to an acute political and constitutional crisis. There are clearly rifts within the ruling class and its security apparatus, above all over how to deal with popular discontent.

The police and military chiefs had joined the prime minister's cabinet meeting last Friday that decided to seek emergency rule, but the royal palace rejected the move after consultations with the country's other sultans.

"Al-Sultan Abdullah is of the opinion that there is no need at the moment for His Majesty to declare an emergency in the country or in any part of the country of Malaysia," the palace announced.

Lawyers said the king's decision was "unusual," but he had not exceeded his powers, as a supposed constitutional monarch, by blocking the prime minister's plan. They said Muhyiddin had merely made a "request," not a formal application, for emergency rule.

Muhyiddin's proposal for emergency rule had provoked widespread opposition, and consternation in the wealthy corporate elite. There were concerns that such a move

could set off a social explosion and further crash the economy. It had been "greeted with alarm by Malaysians," Al Jazeera and Reuters reported.

Muhyiddin's "request" was an obvious bid to cling to office after opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, claimed to have secured the parliamentary numbers to topple the unstable coalition government.

The government could face defeat in a no-confidence vote when the legislature resumes for the scheduled November 6 annual budget, which will report a massive fiscal deficit. Such a vote could instigate an early general election.

Echoing big business alarm, Anwar said he was "deeply concerned" by the emergency bid. A "descent into dictatorship and authoritarianism" would damage the economy and be a "threat to national security."

Anwar said the government's handling of the pandemic response was "lacking" and too little was being done to revive the economy.

Since the end of British colonial occupation in 1957, emergency rule has been imposed once before. That was in 1969, during anti-Chinese pogroms whipped up by the ethnic Malay ruling class.

Under that order, the constitution was suspended, parliament was dissolved and a National Operations Council took over the government. A curfew was imposed, the media was censored and opposition politicians were arrested, facing indefinite detention. Parliament reconvened in February 1971 under tight UMNO control, but the emergency ordinance was not repealed until 2013.

As in other parts of the world, the pandemic is producing a public health and economic catastrophe.

Malaysian authorities reported another 823 new COVID-19 cases on October 25, bringing the total to 26,565—more than double the number a month ago—and the total number of fatalities has risen to 229.

Most of the cases had been in Sabah, one of Malaysia's north Borneo states, but infections have spread to the peninsula, leading to partial lockdowns in Kuala Lumpur, the capital, and surrounding Selangor state.

Last week, the International Monetary Fund forecast that the Malaysian economy would shrink by 6 percent this year, worse than the IMF's previous June forecast of a 3.8 percent contraction.

Across the region, the IMF warned, fear of infection and social-distancing measures were eroding consumer confidence, while unemployment was surging, particularly among women and younger workers. Weak global growth, largely closed borders and US-China tensions had worsened prospects of a trade-led recovery

Officially, Malaysia's unemployment rate remained at 4.7 percent in August, the Department of Statistics Malaysia announced last week, leaving about 750,000 workers jobless.

This is a vast understatement, however. Last month, the Ministry of Higher Education revealed the unemployment rate among fresh graduates in 2020 was projected to be 25 percent.

The overall jobless rate was likely to balloon to 13 percent, or 2.4 million people, according to an Employees Provident Fund (EPF) report published in May, based on estimations by the Malaysia Employers Federation.

The situation was even worse in the "informal" sectors. The report said 46 percent of self-employed people—or two million—were out of work. A survey found that 95 percent of the self-employed had lost 90 percent of their income, while 71 percent reported they had enough savings to only last one month.

Social inequality is worsening. Even before the pandemic, EPF said 19 percent of children were living in relative poverty. That is, 1.7 million children were living in a family whose parents or guardians made less than about 2,900 ringgit (\$US700) a month—half the median household income.

Based on EPF's 2019 data, the income of 86 percent of Malaysian workers was less than 4,000 ringgit, and 4.4 million—or half the EPF members—made less than 2,500 ringgit.

These conditions will deteriorate as the ruling elite imposes the burden of the pandemic on the back of workers, including the cost of the 305 billion ringgit (\$73.3 billion) handed out in business stimulus packages.

On October 5, Finance Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz told CNBC that the budget's fiscal deficit would be around 5.8 percent to 6 percent, following financial

"injections" into the economy totalling around 20 percent of the country's gross domestic product.

Two weeks ago, opposition leader Anwar held an hour-long meeting with the king in an effort to take office and stabilise the political order. He told a media conference that he gave the king evidence of the support of 120 members of the 222-strong parliament.

Anwar said: "I urge all parties to give space to the king to carry out his responsibilities under the constitution, and to go through the documents and call party leaders to confirm and receive their input and views."

These are just the latest sordid machinations in the unravelling ruling elite. For 60 years, UMNO relied on an electoral gerrymander, anti-democratic laws and a politically-controlled police, judiciary and media. Anwar became deputy prime minister in that regime but fell out with then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 1998 over Anwar's backing for IMF free-market demands that would undercut UMNO's crony capitalism.

Anwar spent years in jail on trumped-up corruption and sodomy charges, orchestrated by Mahathir's government, before partnering with Mahathir to oust Mahathir's successor, Najib Razak, over the multi-billion dollar 1MDB scandal.

Mahathir and Anwar also opposed Najib's signing of \$22 billion worth of infrastructure deals with Chinese corporations as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative.

The pair cobbled together the Pakatan Harapan coalition, which won the 2018 election. That opportunist arrangement broke apart in February this year after Mahathir reneged on a deal to hand over the prime minister's post to Anwar. Muhyiddin, who had also switched allegiance from UMNO to Pakatan, was installed as prime minister with the backing of the Malay elite after a week of turmoil.

None of these factions has any commitment to democratic rights. While Muhyiddin has called for a state of emergency to be imposed, Anwar's opposition is based on fears of a social explosion and potential economic damage. Both have appealed to the unelected king to arbitrate on behalf of Malaysia's ruling class.



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