

Malaysian government implodes with COVID-19 epidemic out of control

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Amid an accelerating COVID-19 epidemic and deteriorating economy, Malaysia's Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin resigned last Monday. He was replaced on Friday by Ismail Sabri Yaakob, a member of the right-wing United Malays National Organisation and deputy prime minister in the previous government.

Ismail is the country's third prime minister in less than four years. His installation will do nothing to end the political turmoil and instability that followed the defeat of the UMNO-led coalition at the 2018 national election. UMNO had been in power continuously since formal independence from Britain in 1957, through a gerrymander, autocratic methods of rule and domination of the media and state apparatus.

UMNO was defeated in 2018 by an electoral alliance between an opposition coalition led by Anwar Ibrahim and the United Malaysian Indigenous Party (Bersatu), a UMNO breakaway led by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. In 1998, amid the Asian financial crisis and bitter disagreements over economic policy, Mahathir sacked Anwar as finance minister, expelled him from UMNO then jailed him on trumped-up charges.

As part of the opportunist electoral arrangement between the two political enemies, Mahathir was installed as prime minister with Anwar due to take over in 2020. The political tensions within the ruling coalition, which were evident from the start, led to its collapse as the time for Anwar's installation as prime minister approached.

In March 2020, Muhyiddin Yassin, who had served as interior minister, split from the coalition with most Bersatu members, and cobbled together a government with the support of UMNO and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS).

UMNO's defeat in 2018 had been the result of

widespread popular discontent over social inequality, entrenched corruption, and autocratic methods of rule. That opposition has only intensified as a result of the Muhyiddin government's gross mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Malaysia now has one of the highest infection rates and deaths per capita in the world. Daily new infections have more than doubled since June when a partial lockdown was imposed and hit a record 23,564 last Friday, bringing the country's total to over 1.5 million cases. The death toll stands at more than 13,000.

The pandemic was initially contained after the Muhyiddin government imposed a strict lockdown shortly after coming to power and by July 2020 announced that the country had zero cases. However, as restrictions were eased, the number of infections and deaths rapidly escalated out of control.

In January, Muhyiddin secured the support of the king for the declaration of a state of emergency. That was driven more by his government's growing political crisis than the need to contain the spread of the virus. The measures that contained the pandemic between March and July last year had not required emergency powers.

By June, the daily number of cases hit 7,000, when Muhyiddin declared a "total lockdown" which was described by critics as "half-baked." The government permitted 18 manufacturing centres to continue to operate, mainly at 60 percent capacity, transforming factories and workers' crowded dormitories into major transmission sites for the virus. This dangerous situation was compounded by the lack of financial support, forcing workers to go to work just to survive, and an inadequate testing and contact tracing regime.

The failure of the government to contain the virus, together with the worsening economic and social crisis,

has fuelled opposition, including protests by young people and a strike last month by grossly overworked junior doctors. The hospital system has been overwhelmed by COVID cases and lacks beds, staff and equipment.

Al Jazeera reported last month: “Social media has been awash with harrowing photos and videos... One video showed bodies kept in what appeared to be a hospital storeroom while the neighbouring ward was so full, patients were sitting in wheelchairs or on benches dragged in from corridors outside. Others have shown people queueing for hours at COVID-19 assessment centres following positive tests and crowded and unsanitary conditions at government-run quarantine facilities.”

An Australian National University survey of South East Asian countries found that 49 percent of respondents in Malaysia were “very worried” they might fall ill or die. Some 41 percent were “very worried” the pandemic would affect their financial situation and their children’s education.

With the economy stagnating and expected to grow by only 3-4 percent this year, UMNO seized on the mounting political crisis to pull the plug on the coalition government. Muhyiddin was forced to step down after key UMNO figures left the ruling coalition. The installation of Ismail Sabri Yaakob, a longstanding UMNO member and defence minister in the previous government, effectively puts UMNO back in power.

Bridget Welsh, a South East Asia expert with Malaysia’s Nottingham University, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): “Malaysia has a new PM, with essentially the old politics and players. It’s back to the past: UMNO is now in PM seat, returning to power through elite bargains despite being booted out for corruption in 2018.”

Ismail is a particularly zealous proponent of UMNO’s racialist politics of favouring ethnic Malays, who constitute about 60 percent of the country’s population, over its large ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities. In 2019, while UMNO was in opposition, he reportedly called on the Muslim Malays to wage a “jihad” against the ruling coalition and accused it of being anti-Islam.

Ismail’s record of ethnic Malay chauvinism is a warning that the new government will resort to the stock-in-trade of UMNO politicians—divisive racialism

and police-state methods—to deal with the widespread popular opposition that will inevitably develop.

His government is reliant on a disparate coalition for its slim parliamentary majority and will be seen by much of the population as simply a continuation of the previous Muhyiddin administration that failed to control the pandemic.



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