

Economic hardship, COVID and political instability dominate today's Malaysian election

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An unpredictable election is being held in Malaysia today as a result of a snap dissolution of parliament last month by Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob, the leader of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). With the official opposition parties in disarray, UMNO and its Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition are hoping to capitalise on recent state election victories.

Political instability continues, however, and harsh economic conditions prevail for the working class and rural poor, making the outcome of the election far from certain.

Through a combination of gerrymandering, autocratic methods of rule and domination of the media and state apparatus, UMNO-led alliances ruled Malaysia for over 60 years after formal independence in 1957. It therefore came as a political shock when UMNO and BN lost the May 2018 election, despite the gerrymander and pork-barrelling of funds to UMNO-preferred electorates.

The underlying cause for UMNO's loss was mass social anger at inflation, low wages and shocking levels of ruling-class corruption.

The victor in 2018 was Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope), a supposed multi-racial coalition led by former UMNO Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Marketing itself as progressive and reformist, Pakatan was predicated on ending the vices of UMNO, including endemic corruption, Malay chauvinism against the sizeable Chinese and Indian minorities, Malay crony capitalism, anti-democratic rule and police-state measures.

However, extreme opportunism and desperation for political gain at any price has been the norm for Pakatan since its inception. This led to a partial return

to power by UMNO in 2020, in partnership with a breakaway faction of Pakatan, and then the assumption of the prime ministership by Yaakob in 2021, as the country was devastated by COVID-19. The political crisis of Pakatan has also caused a collapse in its vote in recent state elections.

Ordinary Malaysians confront a growing disparity between wages and rampant inflation, driven by a supply-chain crisis that flows from the ruling elite's refusal to eradicate COVID, along with the US-NATO led war in Ukraine against Russia.

In the middle of this year, food inflation, including for chicken, which is a staple animal protein, reached 10 percent. This hit middle-class and poorer households particularly hard. In the case of chicken, inflation was significantly driven by price increases for fertilisers due to Western sanctions on Russia (which is a major supplier), with associated increases in the cost of animal feed and crops.

For households in the bottom 40th percentile, approximately 83 percent of average income is required to cover food and non-food expenses, leaving a meagre buffer of 17 percent to absorb any price shocks. For households in the top 20th percentile, the buffer is about 50 percent.

As a result, comments like the following on Facebook have proliferated: "I am eating only two meals a day now. I still need to feed my baby, no matter how difficult life is now." And on Instagram: "I shop for groceries at wholesale markets instead of supermarkets and I have cut back on outdoor dining. On top of that, we only run one air conditioner between 7pm and 7am."

There is also the experience of COVID, with about

36,500 official deaths recorded so far. Most of these occurred during the mid-2021 Delta wave, when daily official COVID deaths horrifically exceeded 200 per day from mid-July to the end of September. While daily COVID fatalities are currently much lower at about 5 to 10 per day, dangerous immune-evasive variants such as XBB continue to emerge. The official government figures are undoubtedly understated.

Harsh realities like these have translated into hostility toward official politics from workers and the rural poor. As a result, a recent Merdeka Center survey based on 1,209 voters noted that “it is possible to imagine that no single coalition will attain a large enough plurality to form a government with just one other party or coalition.”

UMNO’s calling of an early election, which would otherwise have been held shortly after July 2023, has been prompted by two factors.

First, there is UMNO’s recent state election victories. In Malacca in November 2021, BN secured 21 of 28 seats. This was followed in Johor in March when BN won 40 out of 56 seats. Both results overturn the 2018 state election results, particularly in Johor where Pakatan previously won with a significant margin of seats.

These state election results, however, particularly in Johor, have been plagued by massive voter abstention. Of the 56 seats contested in Johor, 40 had a voter turnout of between 50 and 60 percent, reflecting a generalised level of alienation from political parties, particularly Pakatan.

Far from being in a position of strength, BN only gained an additional 17,000 votes in Johor compared with 2018. That was despite the number of registered voters increasing by about 750,000 due to changes in electoral laws in January that resulted in the automatic registration of voters from ages 18 to 20, as well as previously unregistered voters, disproportionately represented by voters under 30.

Second, UMNO’s early election push was due to the expiry in late July of the “Memorandum of Understanding [MoU] on Political Stability and Transformation.” The MoU was signed in September 2021 by UMNO and Pakatan. That came after UMNO and BN ousted their ethnic Malay rivals, Bersatu and its Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition led by former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

Having deposed Muhyiddin, BN nevertheless formed a coalition government with PN on the basis of ethnic Malay chauvinism. PN is made up of large numbers of ex-UMNO operatives who opposed the outrageous levels of corruption within UMNO on the grounds that it marred the credibility of Malay crony capitalism. BN, aware that its nominal PN allies were looking to re-establish control, made a deal with Pakatan.

Under the MoU, Pakatan was to support the government or abstain from voting on the budget, supply and motions of no confidence, effectively propping up an otherwise defunct government. In return, the government was to push through certain reforms, including the automatic voter registration laws.

The opportunist character of the MoU was outlined by disgraced former UMNO Prime Minister Najib Razak, who recently lost his appeal against a 12-year sentence for embezzling RM 42 million (USD 9.4 million) from the Malaysian state investment fund, 1MDB. Najib noted in July: “It’s weird that PH [Pakatan] keeps slamming [the government for being incompetent, corrupt and racist] but sticks to [the] MoU.”

For Malaysia’s working class and rural poor, if the 2018 election was about ousting UMNO and bringing in Pakatan as the hope for the future, these expectations have been repeatedly dashed.

The following comments from young Malaysians in the lead up to the Johor state election point to this disaffection: “[The politicians] only talk to each other when they make decisions, they don’t care what we want or think.” “We know they are guilty of stealing so much money from the country... But when regular people steal bread because they are hungry and desperate, they go to jail.” “We don’t need politicians. We can still survive.”

Voters aged 18 to 40 are estimated to make up 58 percent of the electorate, adding to the volatility of the political turmoil.



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