

Malaysian parliament endorses unstable new government

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In its first sitting since the national election on November 19, the Dewan Rakyat, the lower house of the Malaysian parliament, passed a motion of confidence last week in the coalition government formed by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

The confidence motion followed the appointment of a new cabinet the previous week. The process to fill 28 cabinet posts took place behind closed doors, doubtless involving haggling over the conflicting interests of the ruling class parties that form the “Unity Government” coalition and provide around 148 votes in the 222-seat Dewan Rakyat.

The heterogeneous nature of the cabinet that Anwar has cobbled together is a product and reflection of a deep crisis of capitalist rule in Malaysia. Its “unity” is based on the political quicksand of a temporary truce of rival bourgeois factions with conflicting economic perspectives and entrenched interests.

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which ruled Malaysia for more than six decades since formal independence from British imperialism in 1957, has collapsed, giving way to a fragmented political establishment. All of the political parties are mired in communal politics and none offers any solution to the growing economic and social crisis facing working people.

UMNO based its rule on police-state measures, a gerrymander favouring ethnic Malays at the expense of substantial ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities, and political domination of the state apparatus, the judiciary and the media. It ruled on behalf of crony Malay capitalists cultivated through a system of entrenched racial discrimination giving preference to Malays in education, public sector jobs and business.

UMNO suffered a devastating defeat at the 2018 election and the monolith split apart. Anwar however

has brought the main UMNO rump, which lost further seats at the November election, into major cabinet positions. Anwar did this at the expense of the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP)—the major partner of his Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) in his Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition. The PKR’s main support base is largely among urban Malays.

UMNO, reduced by the election to just 30 seats, was given six cabinet posts including the powerful portfolios of Defence, Foreign Affairs and International Trade and Industry. In addition, UMNO president, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who faces 47 corruption charges, was made one of the two deputy prime ministers.

The PKR with 31 seats holds eight posts including Finance (held by Anwar), Economy and Home Affairs, which controls the police. By contrast, DAP with 40 seats was given only four less important posts.

Underscoring his orientation to Malay communal parties, Anwar handed the other post of deputy prime minister to Fadillah Yusof from the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), a coalition largely formed from former politicians from UMNO or UMNO coalition partners in Sarawak.

Anwar is clearly concerned at the electoral gains made by the Islamist Parti Islam se Malaysia (PAS)—the only party to make any significant gains in the November election. It shot from 17 to 43, making it the largest party in the Dewan Rakyat. It won seats not only in its strongholds on the undeveloped east coast but also in the cosmopolitan state of Penang.

PAS made gains by appealing to the alienation of Malays from the political establishment with a combination Malay communalism and Islamic fundamentalism based on sharia law. According to the Malaysian press, Anwar made an offer to PAS to join

the government, but it refused.

Anwar's "unity" government will be no more stable than the previous three governments that came and went over the past four years. The government is riven with divisions not only over communal politics but associated differences over basic economic issues and orientation.

Anwar was expelled from UMNO in 1998, amid the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, while serving as deputy prime minister and finance minister to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who ruled for over two decades, until 2002, with an iron fist.

Anwar was thrown out of UMNO by Mahathir, not because he opposed its authoritarian rule or racial policies, but because he sought to implement the International Monetary Fund's demands for opening up the Malaysian economy, threatening the party's crony capitalist backers. When Anwar launched anti-corruption rallies across the country, Mahathir had him arrested, beaten and eventually jailed on bogus charges of corruption and sodomy.

Anwar was eventually released but Mahathir's successor, Najib Razak, jailed him a second time on similar trumped-up charges. However, his electoral alliance—consisting of PKR, DAP and Amanah, a breakaway from PAS—joined forces with Mahathir who had split with UMNO to form the Bersatu party and capitalised on widespread disaffection to win the 2018 election.

Anwar cut a deal with his former jailer Mahathir on the basis that Mahathir would pardon him and make Anwar prime minister after Mahathir served the initial term. While Anwar was pardoned, Mahathir was never going to fulfill the second half of the bargain as their fundamental differences on economic policy remained. Mahathir refused to step aside and ultimately broke with Bersatu.

What followed, as COVID-19 hit the population and work force, were two unstable governments, amid the health crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and juking of public health measures at the behest of big business. The first was formed by Bersatu's new leader Muhyiddin Yassin with PAS and UMNO. The second led by UMNO's Ismail Sabri Yaakob was propped up by Anwar's coalition.

Amid the worsening global crisis of capitalism, the new government will seek to impose new burdens on

working people. Food inflation is already hitting the poorest layers of the population. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), food inflation in the 12 months to September hit 15 percent. Some analysts warn it could hit between 17 and 19 percent next year.

Prices are increasing sharply for basic foods that are widely used. The subgroup of milk, cheese and eggs showed the highest increase among all food subgroups, recording an 8.8 percent increase in October. The previous government imposed a price ceiling on eggs but that simply restricted supplies.

Food inflation and shortages will inevitably fuel social unrest. The current government, however, will be just as ruthless as the previous UMNO regimes in cracking down on protests and strikes as it seeks to impose the demands of business.

In his first speech, Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi indicated the class interests that Anwar's cabinet will serve, saying international investors should be reassured by the new government's appointment.



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