

Malaysia in 2020

Fragile Coalitional Politics and Democratic Regression

ABSTRACT

It was a tumultuous year for Malaysia. As the country was experiencing the onset of the first wave of COVID-19 in late February 2020, the majority coalition, the Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan) that formed the federal government at the time broke apart due to defections, symbolized by the so-called Sheraton Move. A new government led by the National Alliance (Perikatan Nasional, PN) coalition came into power after the king appointed its leader, Muhyiddin Yassin, prime minister, replacing Mahathir Mohamad. The PN government immediately faced two severe challenges: the global pandemic threat and the crisis of legitimacy due to weak coalition building. This article mainly focuses on the second challenge, namely the ways the PN government has been able to avoid a parliamentary vote of no confidence and keep its coalition intact, albeit precariously.

KEYWORDS: Pakatan Harapan, Perikatan Nasional, constitutional monarchy, Sheraton Move, party-hopping

INTRODUCTION

To fully comprehend the political upheavals that have taken place in Malaysia in 2020 we need to turn the clock back two years. In May 2018, Malaysian voters made history by ushering the opposition party, Coalition of Hope (Pakatan Harapan, PH), into victory and ousting the long-ruling National Front (Barisan Nasional, BN) government, which had been in power for 61 uninterrupted years. This unprecedented moment was even more impressive

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given the massive electoral gerrymandering and malapportionment rigged against the PH.

The PH comprised four major parties: the multi-ethnic People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR), the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Islamic National Trust Party (Parti Amanah Negara, Amanah), and the Malay-nationalist Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, Bersatu), united by the singular purpose of bringing down the scandal-ridden prime minister, Najib Razak, and his BN government. While this alliance of convenience succeeded in pushing out an unpopular and corrupt prime minister, the ensuing responsibility of governing the country soon exposed its fragility and its lack of a coherent agenda, which ultimately led to its downfall, a mere 22 months after assuming the reins of power.

The fragility was evident from the onset, when the PH government formed its cabinet. Bersatu, despite holding only 13 parliamentary seats out of 121 won by PH (11%), managed to secure the prime ministership, along with 12 cabinet posts out of 56 available (21%).¹ Similarly, Amanah, which had 11 parliamentary seats (9%), was given 10 cabinet posts (18%), including the highly coveted Minister of Defense portfolio. Meanwhile, PKR and DAP received 14 and 13 cabinet posts, respectively, despite being the two biggest parties in PH, with 47 and 42 parliamentary seats, respectively. Both Bersatu and Amanah are Malay-oriented parties, and their disproportionate allotment of cabinet posts was an attempt to assure the jittery Malay-Muslim population that the status quo ante of Malay-Muslim political supremacy would remain intact despite the change in government. Nevertheless, the deep insecurity among the Malays persisted, marked by frequent ethno-religious confrontations during the PH government's short-lived tenure, and deftly exploited by the opposition coalition, National Concord (Muafakat Nasional, MN), which was made up of the Malay-nationalist United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS). It was the seemingly intractable ethno-religious tensions, in addition to the frictions within the PH and an unclear prime ministerial

1. To augment its weak position within PH, Bersatu later managed to increase its number of MPs to 31, by enticing former UMNO MPs to defect. Bersatu and UMNO share a conservative Malay-nationalist agenda and Malay-majority constituencies, which made the defections seamless.

succession plan, that undid the PH government less than two years after it came into power.

FISSURES AND FLUIDITY IN COALITIONAL POLITICS

On February 23, 2020, Bersatu, along with 11 MPs from PKR, decided to leave the PH government and enter into a coalition with UMNO and PAS to form a new government. This was later dubbed the Sheraton Move, after the posh hotel near Kuala Lumpur where the coup plotters gathered that night. It resulted in the PH government losing its majority in the parliament, which soon led to its collapse. The prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who was also the chairperson of Bersatu, inexplicably resigned from his prime minister position, creating a power vacuum at the top and triggering a chain of events that are still unfolding. Mahathir and his rivals, Anwar Ibrahim (the *de facto* leader of PH) and Muhyiddin Yassin (Mahathir's deputy in Bersatu), all claimed to have mustered enough of a majority to form a new government and promptly sought an audience with the king to receive his blessing. On the night of February 29, the king announced that in his view Muhyiddin Yassin was most likely to command the majority of the parliament and therefore should be made the new prime minister. On March 1, he was sworn in as the eighth prime minister of Malaysia and subsequently formed the National Alliance (Perikatan Nasional, PN) government, just when the country was beginning to confront the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PN coalition mainly consists of Bersatu, UMNO, PAS, rogue PKR MPs, and other smaller components, mostly East Malaysian parties. The legitimacy of the PN government, that is whether it had the confidence of a majority of the lower house (Dewan Rakyat), was never challenged in the parliament. Initially, the PN government received a temporary reprieve due to the pandemic, so much so that the public gave it a high approval rating for its timely and decisive actions in dealing with the coronavirus. The moment of truth came in mid-May, when the PN government was forced to convene a parliamentary sitting as mandated by the constitution. The PN government was well aware of its legitimacy problem and wanted to avoid a no-confidence vote in the parliament. It did so by appointing a new parliamentary speaker, who in turn set the parliamentary agenda to just one day and one item, which was to listen to the king's address, despite strident protestation from the opposition. Thus the PN government managed to survive the first major challenge to its legitimacy.

SIZE DOES NOT MATTER, AND THE CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY

As it had in the PH government, Bersatu has an outsized influence in the PN government despite having fewer parliamentary seats than UMNO's 54; PAS, meanwhile, has 18. But unlike the PH era, there is no real need for the PN government to calm the nervous Malay-Muslim population at the prospect of losing its political supremacy, because all three major parties that make up the PN government are Malay- and Islamic-oriented parties. In other words, Bersatu, with its fewer parliamentary seats, should naturally let UMNO take on a bigger role in the PN government, a fact that was not lost on UMNO. Muhyiddin at first tried to appease UMNO and other allies by expanding the cabinet to 70 posts (from 56 during the PH era) and appointing UMNO leaders to important portfolios such as senior minister for security, minister of defense, and minister of energy and natural resources. He even appointed MPs from UMNO and other parties to head government-linked companies, which are known to be a cash cow for political parties.

Despite the strategic appointments, UMNO still felt that it was playing second fiddle to the more dominant Bersatu and that it should have been the other way around. UMNO has threatened on several occasions to leave the PN coalition and thus deprive the PN government of the majority it needs for legitimacy, which to date has not been tested in the parliament. Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the now-opposition PH, saw the chink in the PN's armor and sought to drive it apart to form a new government with him at the helm. On September 22, Anwar announced in a press conference that he had a "strong, formidable, convincing majority" in the parliament, the list of which he would take to the king, to receive his blessing to form a new government. After much dilly-dallying, the king granted an audience, but Anwar left empty-handed. Anwar's claim of majority support was not completely baseless, though, as UMNO leaders such as its president, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, and former PM Najib Razak had publicly stated that UMNO MPs had the right to follow their conscience as to whether to continue supporting the PN government or even whether to back Anwar's bid to form a new government.

Regardless of the outcome of Anwar's quest for power, the prospect of UMNO working in concert with Anwar had indeed rattled the PN government. The parliament was due to convene in early November to debate and pass the 2021 budget, which meant the PN government finally had to reckon

with the looming fear of losing, either in the budget vote or in a vote of no confidence. What Muhyiddin did to circumvent this eventuality was unparalleled in Malaysian history. On October 23, 2020 he publicly announced a plan for a state of emergency that would ban all political activities, and even suspend parliamentary sitting, due to the rising cases of COVID-19 in the country. The general public, along with PH, UMNO, and PAS, roundly condemned the plan as ill-advised and self-serving. But before it could be implemented, it needed the blessing of the king, which the king did not bestow. He did however say that the PN should be allowed to table the budget in the parliament without fear of losing the confidence of the majority, which it successfully did on November 6. It seemed that the king had thrown the PN government a lifeline, albeit a short one.

CASCADING EFFECT OF PARTY-HOPPING

Precarious coalitional politics could also be observed at the state level. The political tsunami that swept across the Malaysian political landscape during the 2018 general election and brought PH to power at the federal level also resulted in PH taking over several state governments from BN. In the months following the Sheraton Move, the PN coalition, emboldened by its success at the federal level, tried to wrest control from PH-led state governments. Several state governments where PH had a slim majority were particularly vulnerable to party-hopping and hostile takeover. States like Kedah, Perak, Johor, and Melaka ended up falling to PN when some of their assemblypersons were lured into switching sides. For instance in the northern state of Kedah, only two state assemblypersons from PH needed to defect for PN to take over the state government, and that is exactly what transpired. PN attempted a similar gambit in Sabah, where party-hopping has always been the political norm. The PH chief minister, Shafie Apdal, preempted the move by dissolving the state legislature and holding a fresh election on September 26, 2020. But PN won that election and is now in control of the Sabah state government.² The fragility we saw when it came to coalition building and sustainability at the federal level was replicated at the state level, though only

2. The selection of a new chief minister for Sabah after the election again laid bare the acrimonious relationship between Bersatu and UMNO when both put forward their own candidates. It was Bersatu's candidate who prevailed in the end, which left UMNO stewing in resentment.

in state governments where the majority was slim enough that the defection of a handful of legislators could result in a change of government.

THE KING AS A POLITICAL REFEREE

It would be remiss not to touch on the pivotal role played by the king at the heart of the political quagmires mentioned above. Malaysia has a constitutional monarchy, in which the king serves as the titular head of state with largely ceremonial powers. What the political crises in 2020 have shown is that the symbolic authority of the king can be reinterpreted and put to use to serve the political ends of those vying for the office of the prime minister and thus in need of legitimacy. Instead of earning this legitimacy conventionally through the publicly transparent parliamentary sitting, the contenders for the post such as Mahathir Mohamad, Muhyiddin Yassin, and Anwar Ibrahim opted to go to the king to receive his blessing and validation, without having to openly disclose their majority support. Thus the king wielded an authority that went beyond that ascribed to him by the constitution, which is to formally appoint the prime minister based on the clear majority established by the parliament. Instead, the king unilaterally appointed the person he personally deemed to have the majority, a clear inflation of his constitutionally endowed authority. It was, simply put, undemocratic.

OTHER SECTORS

There were no major developments in foreign relations as the country retreated into itself and sealed its borders for most of 2020. Malaysia's focus was exclusively on its messy domestic affairs.

As with other countries around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic also caused the Malaysian economy to shrink significantly in 2020. In the fourth quarter of 2019, Malaysia's GDP was valued at USD 365 billion; a year later it had dropped to USD 333 billion. The economy in 2020 took its biggest hit in the second quarter, when the government's Movement Control Order shuttered most businesses and furloughed many workers. The economy shrank by 17% as the whole country went into a partial lockdown to stem the spread of the pandemic. The easing of movement control from late June 2020 saw the economy gradually bouncing back, albeit not anywhere near its pre-pandemic level. In the third quarter, it declined by only 2.7% as most

businesses began to operate and rehire workers.³ Since Malaysia is an integral part of the interconnected global economy, the prospect for higher economic growth remains uncertain at this moment, as the rest of the world is still grappling with the fallout from the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

When the Malaysian people ended the six-decade reign of the BN government through the ballot box in 2018, it was heralded as a momentous step toward the deepening of democracy in the country. In 2019, the Economist Intelligence Unit gave Malaysia its highest democracy score since the rating was created in 2006, a clear nod to the country's democratic progress.⁴ Unfortunately, democracy was set back in early 2020 when Bersatu and several PKR MPs plotted with the opposition to topple the PH government and form the current PN government, whose legitimacy has yet to be proven in the parliament. The political uncertainty engendered by rampant party-hopping and the naked drive for power opens a space for the hitherto ceremonial institution of the monarchy to unilaterally assert its publicly unaccountable authority as the sole arbiter of disputes. Such was character of Malaysian politics in 2020, and it is one that is likely to persist well into the near future.

3. Department of Statistics Malaysia, "Malaysia Economic Performance Third Quarter 2020" (https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=100&bul_id=ZIRNZVRDUmNzRFFQq29lZXJoVoUxQT09&menu_id=TE5CRUZCb1h4ZTZMODZlBmk2aWRRQT09, accessed on December 5, 2020).

4. Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2019" (<https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>), accessed November 1, 2020.