

Malaysian election: A political shock in South East Asia

By John Roberts
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Malaysia's 14th general election on May 9 produced a historic defeat for the authoritarian United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-led regime that has ruled with an iron grip since the country gained independence from Britain in 1957.

At 9.30 p.m. last night, in Kuala Lumpur's State Palace, King Sultan Muhammad V swore in 92-year-old Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister. Mahathir headed UMNO and was prime minister in the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government from 1981 to 2003. He was installed yesterday as head of the four-party Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition that handed a humiliating defeat to UMNO Prime Minister Najib Razak and the BN.

Along with the virtual one-party police state of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's People's Action Party in Singapore, the UMNO-led autocratic regime had formed the stable political bedrock of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Its demise represents a regional political earthquake, with implications beyond Malaysia.

Almost all national and international commentators had predicted that, while a majority vote would go to the PH opposition, Najib and the BN would still win a majority of seats in the 222-member national parliament due to their brazen gerrymander of electorates.

Najib's government also pork-barreled funds for what UMNO considered its heartland—rural, ethnic Malay regions—to ensure a BN victory. A series of dirty tricks, censorship laws and the manipulation of Election Commission regulations disrupted opposition activity throughout the 11-day legal campaign period.

Deep social tensions, however, have thoroughly undermined the anti-democratic and corrupt political mechanisms in place for six decades. Surveys and

social media made clear the main concerns of the mass of Malaysians were housing, living costs and jobs, combined with immense hostility toward the ruling establishment.

The monthly legal minimum wage is just 1,000 ringgit (\$US253.13). This does not apply to those eking out incomes in the self-employed sector, which in 2017 was 25.6 percent of the workforce. Compared with Singapore, even university graduate jobs are poorly paid.

The PH exploited immense anger over social inequality by promising to remove a regressive goods and services tax (GST) introduced by Najib in 2015. Prior to the GST, only 20 percent of the population paid income tax. The new tax pushed many working-class households over the brink, with increased costs for one third of daily purchases.

The opposition attacked Najib and UMNO over the 1Malaysia Development Fund (1MDB) scandal, in which billions of dollars went missing. According to international investigations, hundreds of millions found their way into Najib's personal accounts.

The new parliament will consist of at least 122 PH members and supporters and three other independents. Mahathir claims the PH will be able to count on 135 votes.

The BN coalition was reduced to just 79 seats, down from the 133 it held after the 2013 election. Of those, UMNO won only 54. The Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), which left the former PR opposition coalition in 2015, won 18 seats.

In the PH coalition, jailed opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's Peoples' Justice Party (PKR) will be the largest party in the parliament with 47 seats, followed by the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) with 42 seats. Mahathir's United Malaysian

Indigenous Party (PPBM), formed by a breakaway faction from UMNO, has 13 seats. The PAS breakaway Amanah, which joined PH, holds 11 seats. Another eight seats were won in Sabah in Borneo by the regionalist Warisan party.

UMNO lost control of the Johor state government for the first time. The opposition coalition also won Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Malacca, Penang, Perak and Perak. The Islamist PAS wrenched Terengganu from the BN.

In urban areas, massive celebrations broke out over the defeat of the UMNO monolith. Its decades-long oppressive rule included the use of anti-democratic laws to economically favour privileged layers of the Malay majority over the Chinese and Indian minorities and the working class of all ethnic backgrounds.

The coalition that is replacing UMNO, however, is the result of a Faustian deal worked out in the interests of other sections of the capitalist ruling class.

What brought the PH coalition together last June, followed by Mahathir's selection in January as its candidate for prime minister, were common interests in getting rid of Najib's regime. The coalition parties cynically calculated that Mahathir could attract enough of UMNO's traditional supporters to win the election.

Mahathir has said he will serve as prime minister for two years, grant a pardon to Anwar Ibrahim after he is released from prison next month, and then stand aside for Anwar, whom he previously sought to destroy, both politically and personally.

Najib jailed Anwar on bogus sodomy charges in 2014 to throttle the opposition. But it was Mahathir who first jailed Anwar in 1999. Anwar had faithfully served as Mahathir's deputy and finance minister until they split over the response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Anwar championed the demands of the IMF, Washington and the financial markets for the opening up of the economy and an end to UMNO's protectionism. Mahathir sacked Anwar and when he organised mass rallies against the government calling for reforms, then had him arrested on frame-up charges of sodomy and corruption.

Mahathir remains the figurehead for the dominant factions of the Malaysian capitalist class. His political return was motivated by the deep concerns in ruling circles that Najib's corruption in relation to 1MDB was so flagrant it risked unleashing mass social discontent.

Mahathir was also bitterly opposed to Najib's agreement to join the proposed Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade bloc, which he alleged would make Malaysia an economic colony of the United States.

While Mahathir issued nationalist rhetoric against the US and the TPP, other sections of the opposition coalition railed against Najib for giving Chinese-based corporations major roles in infrastructure projects, and promised a review of these investment decisions.

Differences are likely to soon emerge within the new government over a range of fundamental issues—not least the foreign policy orientation. Until now, Malaysia has sought to balance between the US, with which it has close military and strategic relations, and China, which is its largest trading partner.

As US imperialism and its Japanese and Australian allies escalate tensions with China, the ruling class of Malaysia and every other country in Asia is being forced to choose which power it aligns with.

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