

Muhyiddin's fate and a National Operations Council

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The Yang di-Pertuan Agong yesterday wrapped up his first day of meetings with top political leaders in the country.

With the exception of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who already holds a scheduled meeting with the ruler on Wednesdays before the cabinet meeting, the other meetings were with opposition leaders.

They included the top Pakatan Harapan leaders comprising Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim, DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng and Amanah president Mohamad Sabu.

They all met the ruler separately for around an hour respectively.

When the opposition leaders left Istana Negara in Kuala Lumpur throughout the day, they kept their cards close to chests.

The narrative for the public was simple: The discussions were on combating Covid-19, ending the emergency and lifting the suspension of Parliament.

The opposition has been hammering on these issues for months and raising them was only natural.

But the elephant in the room is: What will be the opposition's game plan for the Perikatan Nasional government, which it has branded as illegitimate since the Sheraton Move coup in February last year but unsuccessfully tried to regain power.

When Anwar alighted from his vehicle after exiting the Istana Negara to speak to the press, he downplayed any talk of ousting the PN government.

Responding to journalists who popped the burning question about the formation of a new government, Anwar merely replied that the matter did not arise for the time being.

PN fights back

But the reaction from the ruling government was an angry one.

PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang, whose party is a partner in the PN government, called for action against "plotters", who he claimed was trying to oust the government.

Muhyiddin's principal private secretary Marzuki Mohamad came out swinging.

In a nine-minute video, Marzuki made the case against the formation of an all-powerful National Operations Council (NOC) - similar to the one that ruled the country from 1969 to 1971 after the May 13 riots.

"There are those who have proposed to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to form the NOC, which will have absolute power to govern the country as it did during the proclamation of emergency in 1969.

"The situation we are facing today is vastly different from 1969... We are not facing a security emergency but a health emergency," Marzuki said.

He also reiterated that the various ministries were still needed and added that a more vibrant political and democratic process was possible.

If a NOC takes over from the government, and if it follows the 1969 model, the current government comprising 70 ministers and deputy ministers could be

reduced to just 10.

A NOC would concentrate even more power than the current emergency government and runs contrary to the opposition's message of restoring democracy - although a case can be made that Parliament can be reconvened, unlike in 1969 and the present.

Equally ironic is that the PN government, which had for months blocked the reconvening of Parliament amid its fragile majority, is now talking of a more vibrant democracy.

The exact discussions behind the palace walls won't be known unless the opposition leaders who met with the ruler spill the details. But these meetings have already rattled the government.

The NOC proposal

Marzuki's tackling of the NOC proposal head-on has helped piece together the events in the last few days.

The idea of a NOC had been raised in blog circles since late May and later gained more mainstream discussion when it was highlighted by economist Muhammed

Abdul Khalid, who was an adviser to the previous Pakatan Harapan government.

At the time, it was not yet part of the national narrative.

Muhammed argued for the need for a new "courageous, wise and patriotic" team to steer the country amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which has significantly deteriorated despite a state of emergency initiated by the PN government on Jan 11.

He pointed out that the 10-member NOC in 1969, with only two committees - Economic Committee and National Consultative Council - could steer the country out of its darkest hour and revive the economy.

"The panel members comprised public servants, corporate professionals, academics, religious leaders from various communities, journalists, representatives of employers and employees and political representatives.

"It was different from the current team that works in silos and lacks consultation with community leaders and experts in managing the crisis," said Muhammed, who had served as the economic adviser to former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

His proposal has a key difference from the 1969 model - Parliament will be allowed to convene to play a check-and-balance role.

Anwar-Mahathir conversation

Another notable development before the meeting yesterday was also the fact that Mahathir had been in contact with Anwar.

Mahathir's phone conversation with Anwar on May 28 was confirmed by Parti Pejuang Tanahair deputy president Marzuki Yahya, although he downplayed any political cooperation, reported Sin Chew Daily.

According to the report, the phone conversation, initiated by Anwar, was revealed by PKR insiders.

The same insiders had also raised the possibility of a NOC. The phone conversation was disclosed at the PKR supreme council meeting on May 29, but the contents were not revealed.

Mahathir, who represents Pejuang, will meet with the Agong in Istana Negara today. Warisan and a number of ruling parties also have scheduled meetings.

The last of these meetings are expected to take place on June 14, when the Sarawak-based GPS meets with the ruler via video call.

On June 16, the Agong will convene a special conference of the rulers, at which he is expected to consult his fellow rulers on how to move forward.

With the emergency set to expire in August, the Agong still has ample time to weigh his options.

It is still not clear which political bloc will gain the upper hand if the NOC proposal is taken up, but what is certain is that such a council would create more uncertainty over Muhyiddin's fate.

It should be noted that it was also through the NOC that Tunku Abdul Rahman was eventually ousted as prime minister.

When the NOC was formed, it was Tunku's deputy, Abdul Razak Hussein, who was appointed to lead the country.

It will serve Muhyiddin's interest to maintain power until the next general election to leverage the power of incumbency. A NOC would throw that plan into disarray.

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