

Formidable hurdles to dislodge BN
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Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim must overcome a number of formidable barriers before pulling off the first change of government in Malaysia's history.

The ruling coalition, which has dominated the country since independence from Britain in 1957, will not go quietly despite Anwar's appeal this week for a peaceful transition.

"There is a group of Malay elites who cannot fathom that they may have to give up power. They've been in this position of strength and they know nothing else," said Bridget Welsh, a Southeast Asia expert from Johns Hopkins University.

"Anwar knows he has to get the civil service, the military, the king and the the sultans in his court in order to change the system that's been in power for 51 years and where there are entrenched interests."

After a crackdown last week that saw three arrests under a draconian Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without trial, Welsh said Anwar could also face a threat to his life and liberty.

"He has to be concerned for his safety. I think he knows that and I think the international community is very concerned for his safety," she said.

King may play key role

Malaysia's monarchy, which operates under a unique revolving system that gives state sultans the crown for five-year terms, could be key to the high-stakes negotiations currently under way.

170908Anwar has said he has the support of at least 31 lawmakers from the coalition, giving him a small majority in parliament, but if the government does not step down he will need to seek a mandate from the king.

"Anwar will have to deal with the king if he wants to be prime minister," said James Chin, a political analyst from Monash University's campus in Kuala Lumpur.

"At the very least he will have to prove that he commands the confidence of the majority of MPs in parliament."

The government has accused Anwar of bluffing after he refused to release the list of defectors until Abdullah grants him a meeting, but Chin said he was wise to protect the lawmakers from government attempts to claw them back.

"Anwar is moving very slowly and very cautiously, simply because there has never been a change of government since independence, so we're in uncharted territory," he said.

Political brinkmanship to drag on

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi Najib Razak PC Change Portfolio 170908 02The situation is complicated by a suspected power struggle within the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, which has been disarray since elections in March that saw it lose its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time.

Abdullah has defied calls to step down, insisting he will only hand over to his deputy Najib Razak in mid-2010, but challengers appear to be emerging and his replacement could defuse an exodus to the opposition.

Possible successors are Najib, Trade Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, or even a wild card in the form of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, at 71 an older but charismatic member of Malaysia's royalty.

CPPS Bar Council Roundtable 030407 Tricia Yeoh "A potential stumbling block would be if Najib manages to convince all the members of parliament to stay, to promise them their positions of power are secure with him," said Tricia Yeoh (right) from the Centre for Public Policy Studies.

"I do think Anwar has the numbers to form a new government but in terms of strategy and the manoeuvring and the technicalities of how it will be worked out, that remains to be seen," she said.

The 61-year-old opposition leader is also fighting a legal battle against new sodomy allegations - the same charge that saw him jailed a decade ago - which he says have been fabricated to sideline him.

Analysts say the political brinkmanship may drag on for weeks or months, spelling bad news for the economy, investment and the stock market which has been paralysed by the uncertainty.

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