

It will only get weirder

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Yes, 2020 has been all round a strange year for so many things, including politics.

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It has been a weird year, political-ly. The year 2020 started with the continuation of the expected political game between then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and prime-minister-in-waiting Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. In February, it ended unexpectedly: Dr Mahathir resigned as Prime Minister. It was as if the Langkawi MP had outplayed himself when he plotted to stop the Port Dickson MP from becoming PM.

That month, Pakatan Harapan fell when factions in Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia and PKR abandoned the alliance of hope. In March, Perikatan Nasional rose when 12 parties allied to establish the Federal Government.

In March, unexpectedly, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was appointed Prime Minister. Who would have predicted the quiet politician, who despite being Bersatu president was in then party chairman Dr Mahathir's shadow, would take over the No.1 job in the country?

There were questions about how many MPs supported Muhyiddin as PM.

But the lockdown (Collins Dictionary's word of the year) to flatten the Covid-19 infection curve only allowed Parliament to be convened, barring an opening ceremony in May, in July. The various phases of the movement control order also prevented or discouraged Opposition politicians from politicking to question Muhyiddin's support.

The new normal during the height of the pandemic in March, April, May and June was political distancing.

In July, there was a vote in Parliament to remove Dewan Rakyat Speaker Tan Sri Mohamad Ariff Md Yusof. The Speaker was removed when 111 MPs from Perikatan voted for the motion and 109 MPs from an Opposition bloc voted against it.

The vote revealed that 113 MPs supported Muhyiddin – that's 111 MPs plus two: PBS president Datuk



Dramatis personae of the year in politics: (From left) Muhyiddin, the political cat with nine lives; Dr Mahathir, the persistent politician; and Anwar, the perpetual-PM-in-the-wings; plus a slim majority in the Dewan Rakyat all made for strange politics in a very strange year. And things will not be getting back to 'normal' anytime soon in the new year. — Filepics

Seri Dr Maximus Ongkili, who was absent for health reasons, and Deputy Speaker Datuk Rashid Hasnon, who abstained.

That is a razor-thin majority in a Dewan Rakyat with 222 MPs. It would take just two or three MPs to bring down the Perikatan government. That razor-thin majority encouraged the Opposition to test Muhyiddin's leadership throughout the year.

With the change in federal power came the domino effect in the states. The Pakatan state governments in Johor, Kedah, Melaka and Perak fell and Perikatan took over.

Next on the radar was the Sabah government led by Parti Warisan Sabah.

Its fall was not as swift as those on the peninsula. It was a long kiss goodbye for Warisan as former Sabah chief minister Tan Sri Musa Aman plotted to bring down the government he considered illegitimate.

The then Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Shafie Apdal was forced to call for a snap election as a majority of assemblymen had

ditched his government.

The September Sabah polls, which Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) – a coalition comprising Perikatan, Barisan Nasional and PBS – won was a revelation. Although Sabah's political demographic was different from that of Peninsular Malaysia, the polls there hinted at what to expect in GE15: In about 17 seats, GRS parties fought its allies.

In the general elections, expect a free-for-all among the Perikatan parties, especially between Barisan and Perikatan in some contentious seats.

The ouster of Bersatu's Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Ahmad Faizal Azumu by supposed ally Umno on Dec 4 also indicates a political trend. Umno will have no qualms going against Bersatu in GE15.

During the Perak crisis over the formation of a new state government, Umno was willing to work "for the sake of the rakyat" with Pakatan (including bitter enemy DAP) to form a unity government. So in the run-up to GE15, expect the unexpected – Umno politicians

(especially those in the Court Cases Cluster – ie, Umno members facing corruption charges in court) might realign themselves with the Opposition.

The new normal in Malaysian politics is that it is hard to predict – there are endless permutations. It is not like the days when Umno was the strongest party and it ruled the country. Now, even a party with 13 MPs can determine who will be Prime Minister.

The Opposition and some in the government wanted to test Muhyiddin's majority. They filed no-confidence and confidence motions. But new Dewan Rakyat Speaker Datuk Azhar Azizan Harun did not allow the motions to be tabled.

Then there was talk that they would test the PM's majority through Budget 2021 in November.

In an unprecedented (dictionary.com's People's Choice word of the year) move, Muhyiddin approached the King for permission to declare a state of emergency, supposedly in response to the rising number of Covid-19 cases post-Sabah elections. Critics

denounced the move as the PM's attempt to avoid a Budget 2021 showdown in Parliament.

On Oct 25, the King decided that there was no need to declare a state of emergency.

There was talk that Umno's Court Cases Cluster would vote against Budget 2021. However, that did not materialise.

Budget 2021 was passed on Dec 15 when 111 MPs voted aye while 108 said nay, with one absentee (Umno's Gua Musang MP Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah).

Muhyiddin had once again survived a test of his command of the Dewan Rakyat.

He is my politician of the year for surviving political crisis after political crisis throughout 2020. There were times when I thought he faced defeat for sure and yet, somehow, he survived, a political cat with nine (or more) lives.

The big question mark is whether he will be able to keep his Perikatan government intact in 2021, and his big decision will be whether to call for GE15.

Next year, Malaysian politics will probably be even weirder.