

## **Malaysia Continues Under a Cloud**

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### ***National elections on May 5 haven't cooled political and racial tensions***

Any hope that May 5 national elections in Malaysia would cool the political atmosphere appears to have been misguided, leaving a country entangled in deepening racial problems and creating the risk of a real threat to the legitimacy of Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak's reign.

While not calling for Najib's removal, the prime minister's most potent critic, former Premier Mahathir Mohamad, damned him with faint praise, telling Bloomberg News in an interview in Tokyo last week that the United Malays National Organization will continue to support him "because of a lack of an alternative."

Najib himself appears to have gone quiet as figures close to Mahathir including his longtime ally Daim Zainuddin have gone public to say the prime minister's closest political advisors should be sacked. Instead of even attempting to woo Chinese voters, Daim said in an interview with the Chinese News, "surely the Barisan Nasional knows that the Chinese majority areas were gone. Why waste time and money? As a strategy you should concentrate on those areas where you lost by slim majorities in 2006 and strengthen the seats you won in 2008."

In the same interview, Daim echoed criticisms that Najib's forces had in some cases picked the wrong candidates for the race and accused the advisors of attempting to run the election as a popularity contest for Najib instead of a parliamentary race although in public opinion polls, Najib consistently ran far ahead of his party, which is widely viewed as corrupt, racist and tired.

The Daim interview was picked up on a blog maintained by A. Kadir Jassin, editor in chief of Berita Publishing and a longtime close confidant of Mahathir.

"Daim let Najib have it," an UMNO source told Asia Sentinel. "He should go if you ask me. I'd much rather have Muhyiddin. UMNO is particularly upset as we told Najib not to throw money at the Chinese as other constituencies needed the resources and the Chinese wouldn't vote us anyway. So now he has to answer for it."

The "Muhyiddin" in question is Muhyiddin Yassin, Najib's deputy and a man who openly covets Najib's job. A Malay nationalist, he is close to Mahathir. So far, he has maintained his silence on whether he intends to challenge the prime minister at UMNO's annual general meeting, scheduled to be held in October although Najib appears to be trying to move it to a different time to give himself the best advantage.

Meanwhile, although many political analysts say the fact that Pakatan Rakyat won 50.87 percent of the vote to 47.38 percent for the Barisan was an indication of disenchantment with UMNO's racial politics and corruption -- and that urban Malays crossed over to the opposition, groups such as the Malay nationalist NGO Perkasa are demanding an even bigger share of the economic pie for ethnic Malays. Abdul Rahman, the acting Perkasa leader, said that because Malays make up 60 percent of the population, the organization would push for 60 percent of corporate equity and quotas for enrollment in public universities, double the current 30 percent, which Najib has been attempting to reduce or remove over the past four years, but has been thwarted.

The government, he told the news site Malaysian Insider, should be thankful to the Malays for delivering the electoral victory. He echoed Mahathir and other figures in asserting that the Chinese had shown disloyalty by deserting the Barisan.

On the other side, reformers such as Khairy Jamaluddin, the son in law of former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, have urged Najib to press ahead with the social and economic reforms he has attempted to put in place for the past three years in an effort to address the concerns of the young, urban voters who have crossed over to the opposition.

At the same time Najib is being whipsawed by the Pakatan Rakyat, with Anwar Ibrahim leading the charge, continuing with a series of massive rallies in virtually every major city across the country, alleging that the election was stolen through a long litany of electoral abuses including vote buying, phantom voters, intimidation, stolen ballot papers, malapportionment, gerrymandering and other manipulations.

An official with Bersih 2.0, the election reform NGO, told Asia Sentinel the organization has catalogued more than 2,000 specific election violations so far and expects to produce a report, including videos, within two to three weeks detailing the offenses. Anwar has announced his intention to challenge the results in as many as 30 constituencies, 27 of which were won by the Barisan with fewer than 5,000 votes. Since the Election Commission comes under the Prime Minister's Office, there is little chance of success.

So far, 20 opposition figures have been arrested, with four charged with sedition, a colonial era charge of inciting the populace to overthrow the government, although a judge refused to remand them to jail over the police's objections. They were rearrested yesterday. The Pakatan Rakyat executive secretaries of Johor, Pahang and the city of Ipoh have been charged with violating the Peaceful Assembly act that Najib pushed through to replace the previous colonial-era act banning public demonstrations.

Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the 60-year-old former defense minister selected to take over Home Affairs by Najib, hasn't helped matters with a statement almost immediately after his taking over the post by telling those who voted for the opposition that "if you don't like it you can leave."

There is growing tension over the "Black 505" rallies, as they are called, that are being led by Anwar, although the opposition leader has repeatedly said they are peaceful and not meant to overthrow the government. UMNO figures have accused Pakatan leaders of attempting to foment trouble so that they can be arrested to draw sympathy to the cause.

"They want it to get worse," the UMNO source said of a rally in Kuala Lumpur. "It could. The other day someone told me to give him a grenade and he will do the rest. Pakatan people parked their cars all along the highway as if they are untouchable. The laws do not apply to them. The jam lasted till 3 am"

Some 220,000 signatures were delivered to the White House online petition page, exceeding the number required for a response from President Barack Obama. Accordingly, the White House issued a statement that, while congratulating Najib for the victory, noted "concerns regarding reported irregularities in the conduct of the election, and (we) believe it is important that Malaysian authorities address concerns that have been raised. We look forward to the outcome of their investigations."

In any case, however, earlier indications that Najib would face an immediate leadership challenge may not be so certain. With Mahathir publicly -- if lukewarmly -- backing away from demanding a challenge, he may survive although many rank and file UMNO want him out, and infighting appears to be the order of the day inside UMNO. The outlook for investors who had hoped the situation would calm down and that Perkasa would be put back into the attack kennel is receding.

Nonetheless, additional reforms on Najib's agenda will probably be shelved for now, such as a GST and reducing the fuel and food subsidies that have saddled the economy. It was after all Abdullah Badawi's attempts to roll back the fuel subsidy that played a major role in his 2008 electoral debacle.

"Najib is not in a very strong position," Mahathir was quoted by Bloomberg as saying in Tokyo, adding there is a risk that his majority could be weakened further if ruling coalition politicians defect to the opposition. "When you are concerned about that, the focus on development, economy and all that will be affected. That is Najib's problem."

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