

How powerful are Malaysia's sultans?

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IT HAS been two years since the scandal surrounding 1MDB, a Malaysian state investment firm from which billions of dollars have been looted, began to attract attention around the world. During that time Malaysia's prime minister, Najib Razak, has hung on to his job despite claims that nearly \$700m of the firm's money passed through his bank accounts. The opposition fears that heavily gerrymandered elections, due in 2018 but generally expected to take place this year, will hand Mr Najib's party (which has led Malaysia for 60 years) yet another term in power. All this has prompted some Malaysians to wonder whether the country's several sultans could be persuaded to intervene. But how much power do they really have?

Although more than 40 countries retain a monarch of some sort, Malaysia's system is probably the world's oddest. The country has nine sultans, who as well as reigning ceremonially in their own states take it in turns to serve five-year terms as Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the head of state of the entire country. The sultans meet three times a year and are considered guardians of the culture and religion of the ethnic-Malay majority, though they have little formal authority. In the early 1990s Mahathir Mohamad, a long-serving and combative prime minister, managed to push through constitutional amendments withdrawing the sultans' power to veto state and federal legislation, and curbing their legal immunity. His reforms were helped along by public outrage at royal misdeeds—particularly those of the late Sultan Iskandar of Johor, who was convicted of assault and manslaughter for the fatal beating of a golf caddy and only escaped prosecution thanks to his immunity as head of state.

Despite Mr Mahathir's efforts, the sultans' role and the precise limits of their authority remain subject to wide interpretation. In recent years the royals are seen to have grown more active, both in politics and in business. In 2014 the Sultan of Selangor, a wealthy central state, chose not to endorse the chief minister nominated by the local government; he ended up picking from a list of alternative candidates which state legislators were persuaded to supply. In Johor, a southern state just across the causeway from Singapore, the prerogatives of palace and parliament have sometimes blurred—notably in 2015, when the outspoken local sultan (the eldest son of Sultan Iskandar) appeared to order state lawmakers to forbid the sale of e-cigarettes. Full and frank debate about these kinds of interventions is made fraught by an archaic law on "sedition", which occasionally sees jail sentences handed to Malaysians accused of insulting royalty.

For the moment Malaysia's scandal-hit government looks unlikely to face any meaningful opposition from its royals. Although their influence is ticking up, the sultans are hardly popular or powerful enough to tie the hands of Mr Najib's administration; they would probably emerge diminished from the constitutional crisis any such efforts would engender. And it is also not clear that the sultans would benefit were the country's multi-cultural opposition to take office. A weak and pliable central government is probably an asset for any royals aspiring to restore their palaces' wealth and power.

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