

## Malaysian democrats pin their hopes on the country's royals

The Economist

January 28, 2017

By SINGAPORE

### But they make unlikely saviours

ELEPHANTS once carried the sultans of Johor—a sprawling state in southern Malaysia—on tours of their tropical kingdom. Sultan Ibrahim, the present ruler, prefers the saddle of a Harley Davidson. Each year the car-collecting monarch leads a crowd-pleasing convoy through the state's ten counties, sometimes driving motorbikes but also boats, buses, scooters and trains. Last year locals flocked to see the sultan pilot a powerful truck painted in the colours of the state flag, its leather seats stitched with threads of gold.

Sultan Ibrahim is the most charismatic and outspoken of Malaysia's nine sultans (who reign ceremonially in their own states and take it in turns to serve five-year terms as Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the head of state of the entire country). Lately the profile of Johor's royal family has been boosted by the extravagant success of the local football team, the Johor Southern Tigers. Owned by the sultan's son, Tunku Ismail, the club has rebounded from a two-decade losing streak to win three championships in three years.

In this section

The Trump administration vows to get tougher on China's maritime claims

Malaysian democrats pin their hopes on the country's royals

South Korea's ministry of culture is accused of blacklisting 9,500 artists

Australia gets its first aboriginal minister

Islamist agitators try to take down a Chinese Christian governor

An ugly row about sacred cows

Reprints

Related topics

Politics

Government and politics

World politics

Asia-Pacific politics

Malaysian politics

Yet with the scandal-hit administration of the prime minister, Najib Razak, growing increasingly authoritarian, Johor's publicity-loving royals have also become unlikely voices of moderation. Against a backdrop of worsening race relations and decreasing religious tolerance, the sultan has applauded the contributions of Johor's Chinese and Indian minorities, bemoaned his countrymen's fading fluency in English and condemned the creeping Arabisation of its once moderate Muslim culture, notes Frances Hutchinson of ISEAS, a think-tank. As for the crown prince, when religious types criticised him for daring to shake hands with women last year, he resorted to the protection of an oversized rubber glove in a parody of exaggerated piety.

Advertisement

The sultans are considered guardians of the culture and religion of the Malay majority, but have little formal authority. In the early 1990s Mahathir Mohamad, the prime minister at the time, succeeded in pushing through constitutional amendments which withdrew the sultans' power to veto legislation, and curbed the legal immunity their families enjoyed. These reforms were prompted by public outrage at thuggish royal behaviour, most notably that of Sultan Iskandar (father of Sultan Ibrahim), who was convicted of assault and manslaughter and only escaped prosecution for the fatal beating of a golf caddie thanks to his immunity as head of state. (The caddie had apparently laughed when the sultan fluffed a shot.)

In the years since, the precise limit of the royals' role has been contested. (It is a dangerous debate: under an old colonial law, those deemed to have incited "disaffection" with the royals risk imprisonment for sedition.) Observers argue that the sultans are gradually growing more active as the popularity of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the party which has led Malaysia for 60 years, slowly declines. Constitutional lawyers grumbled in 2014 when the Sultan of Selangor, a rich state near Malaysia's capital, declined to endorse the chief minister nominated by local legislators, asking for some alternatives instead. In 2015 the Sultan of Johor provoked similar head-scratching when he appeared to order the state government to ban e-cigarettes.

Now Malaysians have begun to wonder if the sultans might be called upon to moderate—or even to oust—Mr Najib’s floundering government, which has clung to power despite claims that it allowed billions of dollars to be looted from 1MDB, a state investment firm. Last year critics blasted the government for ignoring the rulers’ apparent disapproval of a noxious new security law; meanwhile the opposition is hoping that a royal pardon will free Anwar Ibrahim, its leader, who has been imprisoned since 2015 on trumped-up charges of sodomy. In September Mr Mahathir—still politically active in his nineties, and now one of Mr Najib’s fiercest critics—presented the Agong with a petition, signed by more than 1m Malaysians, seeking the prime minister’s removal.

Mr Mahathir’s request appears to have been quietly brushed aside, which may be for the best. Royal action to oppose Mr Najib would almost certainly provoke a “constitutional crisis”, reckons Saiful Jan, a political analyst. It is anyway not obvious that defenestrating Mr Najib is in the sultans’ interests: for those who would carve out a greater role in politics, a weak government is probably a boon.

The debate reveals the desperation of Malaysia’s liberals, who are repelled by reports of vast corruption but ill served by an opposition mired in squabbles. It also says much about the woefulness of Mr Najib’s government that many reasonable citizens would like to empower unelected figures at its expense. That the country is rehashing old debates about the role of its hereditary rulers illustrates the continuing corrosion of its democratic institutions.

This article appeared in the Asia section of the print edition under the headline “Regal trouble”

**Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2017. All rights reserved.**

Source: <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21715699-they-make-unlikely-saviours-malaysian-democrats-pin-their-hopes-countrys-royals>