

Two steps back for politics in Southeast Asia

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The grim lesson in Southeast Asian politics this past week — underneath the surface-level dramas — is that the problem of the region's political systems isn't too much change, but too much continuity.

Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad leaves his seat to deliver his keynote address during an event in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 28 February 2020 (Photo: REUTERS/Lim Huey Teng).

Malaysia's governing Pakatan Harapan coalition has disintegrated not two years after its historic victory in the 2018 general election. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad resigned suddenly on 24 February after an apparent attempt at a 'self-coup' from factions within the coalition hostile to plans for Anwar Ibrahim to succeed Mahathir.

Muhyuddin Yassin of Mahathir's Bersatu party has since emerged as the new prime minister, endorsed by Malaysia's king and reportedly backed by the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition that was swept from power in popular protest against serious corruption allegations over former prime minister Najib Razak. Najib remains a significant member of BN's dominant Malay-centric UMNO party despite his being on trial for graft and money-laundering charges connected to the 1MDB scandal. The new prime minister was Najib's deputy before being dismissed in 2015 and later forming Bersatu with Mahathir.

If it survives a confidence vote in Malaysia's parliament, a new government built on an alliance of Peninsular-Malaysia based ethnic Malay or Islam-based parties — that is, one which excludes Anwar Ibrahim's multiracial PKR and the Chinese dominated DAP — would be a backward step for pluralism and democracy. It's a regrettable reality that Malaysia's political system revolves around communal politics and has swung

dramatically back in this direction against the hopes of urban voters aspiring to a voice and a stake in a pluralist government.

The circumstances of Pakatan Harapan's collapse are dramatic, but not in itself entirely surprising. Pakatan Harapan was united in the purpose of ousting Najib but beset by differences in ideological outlook and policy. Differences led to infighting as Mahathir and his party backed away from implementing Pakatan Harapan's more progressive election promises, fracturing the coalition and its supporters along familiar lines. This is par for the course in Malaysian politics, where a viable governing coalition must always take into account the differing interests of political parties which are typically founded to represent communal interests in a society long divided along lines of race and religion.

But the latest crisis was triggered more by personalities than differing visions for Malaysia's future between Pakatan Harapan elites, says ANU Malaysia expert Ross Tapsell. All of the main protagonists and rivals in the current drama from Mahathir down cut their political teeth in UMNO before becoming estranged from it. Even when UMNO loses elections, it seems, Malaysia will always be led by an UMNO man in one way or another.

Still, the current crisis is occurring in a context where civil society, the press and ordinary citizens are free to denounce the misbehaviour of their elites, and where all parties have a shot at getting something for themselves in the power-broking.

North of the border, in Thailand, things are more dire. Thailand's democracy movement has to climb a perhaps impossibly high mountain to fulfil its role as a viable opposition which the country's voters gave it in the 2019 election.

Thailand's March 2019 election contained two big surprises: first, the over-performance, relative to expectations, of the military junta's proxy party. More encouragingly for pro-democracy and reformist groups, it also marked a breakthrough for a progressive party helmed by the telegenic billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, and energised by the participation of progressive civil society figures. The particular success of Thanathorn's Future Forward with 'young and social-

media savvy voters ... marked the party as a threat to the post-junta regime', as Kevin Hewison says in our lead article this week.

As usual, when Thailand's conservative establishment sees a threat to its prerogatives, it seeks to delegitimise and, often, outright repress it. Part and parcel of this repression has been so-called political 'lawfare', whereby the conservative-dominated Constitutional Court has been, in Hewison's words, 'a faithful servant of rightist parties and regimes', who see movements like Future Forward as a threat.

Once again, the surface drama is overlaid on a more enduring problem underneath: the consistent refusal of a large chunk of Thailand's conservative establishment to accept the legitimacy of electoral movements — and even governments — which are perceived to challenge their dominance. Political stability will be a pipe dream so long as the judgments of voters as expressed in elections are treated with disdain by the military or ultra-royalist parties.

Nobody expects countries like Malaysia or Thailand — let alone even more politically blighted neighbours — to emerge as textbook liberal democracies any time soon. But a mandate earned at the ballot box, once all else falls away, is sacrosanct in even the most flawed democracy. The least Southeast Asia's political elites can do for the maturation and legitimacy of democratic norms is to not violate the mandate extended by the voters who handed them government, or to disenfranchise outright many millions of voters who exercised their right to choose differently.

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