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Malaysia's 2018 General Election: Alternative Scenarios?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

With just weeks to go, Malaysia's next general election seems to be approaching like an oncoming train. What lies ahead?

Commentary

AS THE 14th Malaysian general election gets nearer, statements by political actors have pointed to the possibility of outcomes beyond the norm. It's not going to be so straight-forward, thus throwing up some unusual scenarios. The first of these raises doubt whether the polls would even take place at all; *emergency rule* could be imposed instead by Prime Minister Najib Razak to avoid a general election. The second scenario predicts that should the elections take place, the outcome would be inconclusive, leading to a *hung parliament*.

The emergency-rule scenario was raised by former premier and now Opposition co-leader Mahathir Mohamad when he talked about Prime Minister Najib possibly using communal tensions to suspend parliament. In other words, he would do what was done in 1969 by his father, the country's second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak, in the aftermath of the racial riots following a strong showing by the opposition. The prospect of a hung parliament was raised by a veteran UMNO leader Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, a respected fixture in Malaysian politics. Interestingly, the prince had given it an uncanny twist: a hung parliament, if it arose, could pave the way for a unity government, headed by a figure acceptable to both sides.

Emergency Rule?

At a forum of young activists in Kuala Lumpur on 4 Feb 2018 Mahathir was asked what the new opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), would do should Najib use racial

and religious tensions to justify suspending parliament. Mahathir said Najib would not dare cling on to power via emergency rule should PH win more popular votes in the coming elections, given the uptrend in popularity of the opposition since the 2008 polls.

Nor would Najib be able to declare a state of emergency without the consent of the king, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. In addition, he must also get the support of the chiefs of police and the armed forces, as in the Philippines in the 1980s when the people rose up against President Marcos. But some say the new National Security Council (NSC) Act 2016 may well allow Najib a bypass route.

Should emergency rule be imposed by Najib, Mahathir said, the Malaysian people should similarly take to the streets: "If there was an emergency declaration by Najib, we can go out every day to demand for an end to the emergency rule and for a return of democracy."

Hung Parliament?

A week earlier, on 27 January, Tengku Razaleigh the UMNO leader predicted that GE14 would end up with no clear winner. Neither the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), nor the opposition BH would get enough support to form a government. "In my discussions and exchanges with friends and acquaintances, not a few alluded to the possibility of a hung parliament," he told a public forum.

"This would mean that the voters are neither for returning the government of the day nor giving power to the coalition offering the alternative. This would mean that the voters want a non-divisive government, comprising all the political stakeholders, to be formed.

"This, if you will, is essentially a national unity government," Razaleigh asserted. Such a government, he added, could only be led by a leader acceptable to both sides -- an MP with a proven record.

Empty Speculation or Loaded Words?

It must be said that both scenarios are not empty words. They have come from seasoned political actors who had been in the ruling coalition for decades. They knew what they were talking about, even though some would dismiss their statements as speculative, at least at this point.

Mahathir in fact had been prime minister for 22 years, been an UMNO politician for longer and has had more than his fair share of political battles. Razaleigh himself is no minnow; indeed he had even challenged Mahathir for the leadership of UMNO and almost toppled him in party elections in the 1980s. Now both of them find themselves on the same side, expressing grave concern for the future of the country under Prime Minister Najib.

Like it or not, the spectre of emergency rule seems to be picking up steam. Some anxiety has emerged among those who have lived long enough to taste life under emergency rule. The leader of the Malaysian army veterans, a retired brigadier-general, has reportedly called on the army and policy to remain neutral in the wake of

talk of possible trouble, either before or after the general election, which must be called by August this year.

“When the armed forces and the police adopt a partisan leaning and take instructions from politicians, then the nation is damned,” said the president of the National Patriots Association (Patriots), Mohamed Arshad Raji.

What Could Lie Ahead

The last time emergency rule was declared, then Prime Minister Razak shook up the political landscape and re-engineered the ruling race-based Alliance to form a broader coalition, the Barisan Nasional. As an attempt at forming a national unity government, even the opposition Islamist PAS and the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) were invited. While PAS joined, only to quit not long after, the DAP refused.

In a way, Razaleigh was predicting a replay of the old scenario of almost 40 years ago. But then a national unity government was preceded by emergency rule. Should an emergency be repeated, the initiator this time, curiously, would be Tun Razak’s son. And Najib is not beyond emulating his father. Notice how he took pride in strengthening ties with China, citing his father’s ground-breaking trip to Beijing in 1974 to establish ties.

To be sure, these are alternative scenarios: alternative to the UMNO-led BN winning, or to PH winning. A BN win would make emergency rule academic, of course, from BN’s point of view. But the same cannot be said should the opposition put up a stiff showing. Still, should a “national unity government” be the compromise outcome, who would be the unifying leader, and which parties would comprise such a “national unity government”? Not so easy. As unpredictable as it already is, what comes out of this general election could prove even hazier.

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