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No-confidence Vote Delay: Muhyiddin On Shaky Ground?

By Prashant Waikar

SYNOPSIS

The Muhyiddin government has delayed a widely anticipated vote of no confidence on his prime ministership when parliament reconvenes on 18 May. Is the new prime minister, whose legitimacy is being contested, feeling insecure? Or does he have the requisite numbers to support him — or is it both?

COMMENTARY

THE MALAYSIAN parliament is set to reconvene for a single day on 18 May 2020. It marks the first parliamentary meeting since Muhyiddin Yassin took over as prime minister through the controversial Sheraton Move, bringing into power a new governing coalition informally known as the Perikatan Nasional (PN).

When he was sworn in on 1 March, the deposed ruling coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH) immediately disputed Muhyiddin's claim to majority support. One of Muhyiddin's first decisions as prime minister was to postpone the parliamentary sitting scheduled for 9 March to 16 April – a move clearly designed to buy time and consolidate support.

Muhyiddin's MCO

Muhyiddin's steps taken to stem the COVID-19 pandemic were drastic. The Movement Control Order (MCO), which began in the middle of March, is now in its fifth phase and has been instrumental in reducing infection rates. Economic stimulus packages amounting to RM260 billion (S\$85 billion) have also been rolled out, though there is considerable debate over their effectiveness.

House Speaker Mohamad Ariff Mohd Yusof had initially accepted the recently ousted prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's proposal to table a no-confidence

motion. However, following the advice of Muhyiddin, the Speaker subsequently announced that there would be no other agenda items after the King's address on 18 May as the COVID-19 virus outbreak has not been fully contained. Not even government legislation will be tabled.

The Malaysian government has been commended for safeguarding public health in its handling of the COVID-19 outbreak. Still, the steps taken to limit parliamentary debate have been criticised as undemocratic and undermining governance procedures.

Muhyiddin's majority has yet to be tested in parliament either. This gives the impression that Muhyiddin is, arguably, insecure.

Has Muhyiddin the Numbers?

Both Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) President, Anwar Ibrahim and Mahathir have, however, conceded that Muhyiddin may have the requisite numbers supporting him. Estimates place members of parliament (MPs) supporting Muhyiddin at between 113 and 118 out of a total of 222.

However, there are reports that some PN parliamentarians are "[stuck overseas](#)" because of travel restrictions. Thus, there was a risk that the opposition would thwart government legislation or successfully unseat Muhyiddin if a vote is called on 18 May.

Nonetheless, trends indicate that Muhyiddin's position is increasingly secure.

Firstly, while relations between Muhyiddin's Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) remain testy, there has been a shift. Early on, many senior UMNO leaders expressed their frustrations at being treated like a junior party. Even though it has the most MPs at 39, only 17 ministerial and deputy ministerial positions went to the party.

In contrast, Bersatu leaders account for 24 such positions out of the 30 to 32 MPs who back Muhyiddin. Reduced access to government positions and the accompanying resources limit the extent to which UMNO can exercise patronage and consolidate power.

UMNO's Position of Expediency

UMNO Deputy President Mohamad Hasan has stated that UMNO's alliance with Bersatu was done purely for short-term expediency. The implicit threat was that the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN), along with Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), could well chart their own course in the next general election.

That said, the odds of UMNO withdrawing its support for PN at the moment are slim. Even though it may feel sidelined, UMNO still prefers some degree of access to the government. A growing number of UMNO MPs have also been appointed to head various government-linked companies (GLCs), with the expectation that more could receive similar positions.

This may have eased immediate pressures on UMNO-Bersatu relations. Indeed, UMNO President Zahid Hamidi has said that BN will not rule out formalising PN as a coalition, though of course the negotiating process would be long-drawn.

PN and the State Assemblies

Movements in various state assemblies since the beginning of May also indicate that PN is solidifying its position. The Johor and Perak state assemblies have been rife with infighting between Bersatu and UMNO. Bersatu's state assembly men have voiced their disgruntlement at being overlooked for state GLC positions by the UMNO Menteri Besar (chief minister), Hasni Mohammad.

The dispute hit a high note after Bersatu's Johor chapter seemed willing to support an opposition-led no-confidence motion against Hasni. Indeed, Muhyiddin had to intervene and mediate the dispute, while the influential Sultan of Johor ultimately put to bed the possibility of a no-confidence motion by warning against any "[disruption](#)".

The dispute in Perak was similarly centred around UMNO-Bersatu relations. Bersatu's Ahmad Faizal Azumu is the state's menteri besar even though the party only has four seats. UMNO has 25. UMNO was dissatisfied with negotiations over state executive council positions. But after UMNO finally received the three remaining executive council positions on 12 May, tensions were eased.

On the same day, Mukhriz Mahathir, who is challenging Muhyiddin for president of Bersatu in its ongoing party elections, lost control of the Kedah state government after two state assemblymen aligned with Azmin Ali quit PKR and announced their support for a PN-led state government.

These recent developments in Johor, Perak and Kedah suggest that Muhyiddin is gaining his footing.

How Long Can Muhyiddin Delay the Vote?

While Muhyiddin's majority is razor thin, it is evident that the opposition is not operating from a position of strength either. Anwar has been named the leader of the opposition, but he only has the explicit support of the 92 MPs in PH.

A handful of Bersatu MPs and Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan) still back Mahathir. While appearing unlikely, a rapprochement between Mahathir and Muhyiddin sometime after the Bersatu party elections in the second half of 2020 cannot be ruled out. Should this happen, PH's position would be weakened further. Clearly, the splits in the opposition benefit Muhyiddin.

While UMNO-Bersatu relations may have improved lately, the alliance's instability is indisputable. There is much that would need to be resolved before they can work together smoothly. Whether the opposition will be able to take advantage of this, however, remains a question mark.

While Muhyiddin's legitimacy is being contested, no doubt, he is the default prime minister until and unless UMNO, PAS and the PH-led opposition are ready for a snap

general election. Given the COVID-19 situation and the difficult economic condition faced by Malaysians, triggering a general election that is estimated to cost up to RM800 million (S\$265 million) is unlikely to be well-received publicly.

Yet, delaying parliamentary proceedings will hang over Muhyiddin and only allow questions over his government's legitimacy to linger. Muhyiddin will, sooner rather than later, have to prove his majority – be it through a vote on the no-confidence motion or a vote on other legislation. Already opposition leaders say the one-day sitting of parliament shows that PN is afraid to face the no-confidence vote.

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