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Malaysia's Political System: End of Permanent Coalitions?

By Wong Chin Huat

SYNOPSIS

Prospects for Malaysia's permanent coalitions are dimming. Its political system would have to develop a new modus vivendi for political inclusion and stability.

COMMENTARY

IN THE latest survey results released by [pollster Invoke](#), 51% of Malaysians polled in February 2021 were not sure which party to vote for if the election was called then, while another 17% declined to answer.

Of the remaining 32%, half (16%) chose Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's Perikatan Nasional (PN) while Barisan Nasional (BN), Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and Pakatan Harapan (PH) enjoyed pathetic support of 8%, 4% and 3% respectively. The low support for all parties reflects voters' disillusion and frustration with the rapid political changes that have taken place since 2015, peaked in 2018 with the ouster of BN followed by the collapse of the PH government 22 months later.

Malaysia's Permanent Coalitions: Fading Out?

When Muhyiddin assumed power in March 2021, PN then was meant to be a grand coalition of Malay and native parties including his Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu), United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), PAS and the ex-BN Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS).

Now mainly the pact of Bersatu and PAS, PN would be challenged by both PH, the official opposition, and an UMNO-led BN in the next election. UMNO sets its goals to annihilate Bersatu, its splinter formed in 2016 and home to UMNO's 15 defected parliamentarians.

At the heart of realignments is the fading out of permanent coalitions, the only way of multi-ethnic, multiparty power-sharing that Malaysians have known since independence.

In countries where no one party can win a simple majority in the parliament, coalitions are commonly formed to ensure political inclusion and stability. But most of these coalitions are formed after election, negotiated based on seat strength and meant to last for only the parliament's term. Coalition partners are to contest against each other in the next election and which parties would form the next coalition government depends on parties' new parliamentary strength.

Political Inclusion and Stability

In permanent coalitions, parties stick to each other before, during and after elections. Not only do they not contest against each other, they try to pool support for each other. Parties in permanent coalitions are akin to formalised factions in parties, except that they maintain separate organisation structure, leadership and party label to appeal to different social constituencies.

The idea of permanent coalition was introduced in Malaysia by circumstance. In 1952, UMNO faced a crucial challenge by its multi-ethnic splinter Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) led by its founder president Dato' Onn Jaafar in Kuala Lumpur's inaugural municipal election. An ad-hoc and local electoral pact between UMNO and the then Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) was rewarded with a landslide, soon giving birth to the Alliance which was subsequently joined by the then Malayan Indian Congress (MIC).

Against the background of a Chinese-dominant communist insurgency, a permanent coalition with parties representing different ethnic groups was seen by both the British and Malaysians as the only guarantee of political inclusion and stability.

The Alliance model was so dominant that it was copied in Sabah and Sarawak by the local parties on the eve of Malaysia's formation. To reduce political competition, Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak merged the three regional Alliance and co-opted opposition parties including PAS into the enlarged coalition of BN in 1974.

This idea was eventually copied by the opposition in 1990 after UMNO's schism between Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his former finance minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. His splinter party, Semangat 46 (S46), brought together PAS and the Chinese-dominant and secular Democratic Action Party (DAP) to form the "second" multiethnic coalition as BN's alternative.

A Two-Coalition System?

Modelling on the British two-party system, a system of two multi-ethnic and centrist permanent coalitions was seen as the only way to dislodge UMNO-BN. Instead of PAS and DAP attacking BN from the ethnic flanks accusing UMNO and MCA as sell-outs of their respective community, an opposition united front induced their moderation with the prospect of winning power.

The “two-coalition system”, however, had a friend and foe in the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system. While it encouraged parties to pool votes to win ethnically mixed constituencies, it also overly weakened the loser between the two permanent coalitions that their communal components were tempted to return to their ethnic or regional flanks.

This resulted in the collapse of Razaleigh’s united front, followed by Barisan Alternatif (BA), Pakatan Rakyat (PR) and ultimately BN after its ousters in 2018. In the first three episodes, PAS’ push for harsh Hudud punishments in PAS-administered states prompted DAP to break ties. The two-coalition project was rescued by UMNO’s successive schisms, first between Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Anwar Ibrahim who led BA and PR, then between Prime Minister Najib Razak and Mahathir since 2015.

Najib successfully drew PAS out and changed the opposition coalitions’ formula of an UMNO splinter — S46 and subsequently PKR — leading PAS and DAP. The 2018 election was fought between BN, PAS and PH which contained two UMNO splinter parties — PKR and Bersatu — and DAP and PAS’ splinter Amanah. When BN disintegrated within months after its defeat due to exodus of East Malaysian parties and defection of UMNO parliamentarians, UMNO and PAS formalised their pact to take on the then Mahathir-led, multiethnic PH, which they accused of betraying the Malays.

End of the Two-Coalition Project?

The fading out of permanent coalitions spells the end of the two-coalition project. While it has successfully dislodged UMNO, it cannot sustain a stable and multi-ethnic permanent coalition in the opposition, not until power is decentralised, incumbency advantages are reduced and a healthy non-communal divide is found between the government and the opposition.

With the current power struggle between UMNO, Bersatu and PAS, even a permanent coalition in government is not possible. The next election is likely to deliver a hung parliament and another post-election coalition, with East Malaysians as guaranteed kingmakers.

Even if UMNO and DAP were to team up in the event of a PKR defeat, the deal would likely be one-term at a time for both because UMNO cannot defragmentise Malay politics to restore its hegemony and DAP will not want to be an MCA 2.0.

The end of permanent coalitions need not be bad news for political inclusion and stability in Malaysia. With proper reforms, post-election coalitions may give Malaysia real stability in competitive politics.

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