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The Evolving Role of Malaysia's Royalty

By Piya Sukhani

SYNOPSIS

As Malaysia's political instability continues, the royalty will take on an increasingly influential position in the country's politics and governance.

COMMENTARY

PRIME MINISTER Muhyiddin Yassin has [agreed to reopen](#) the country's suspended parliament for a five-day sitting from 26 July 2021. This comes after the Malaysian King called on 16 June for parliament to be reconvened [as soon as possible](#). This was a contradiction of Muhyiddin's [previously proposed timeline](#) for reopening the House by September at the earliest.

The rulers have held a largely symbolic position since Malaysia's Independence, but their role in national politics has become increasingly prominent and critical, particularly since 2020, when political fragmentation reached the point where no coalition had a clear and substantive parliamentary majority.

Royalty in Politics

Following Mahathir Mohamad's abrupt resignation as premier in February 2020, King Sultan Abdullah took centre stage in seeking to resolve a week-long impasse by interviewing each of Malaysia's 222 Members of Parliament (MPs) to determine who enjoyed a majority in parliament.

The monarch then announced that Muhyiddin had the support of most legislators and swore him in as prime minister on 1 March 2020. While this majority was not proven in parliament, the King's move was within his constitutional [rights](#).

However, challenges to the legitimacy of Muhyiddin's administration continued.

Reports were rife of backroom horse-trading between Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – the largest party supporting the governing coalition – to unseat Muhyiddin.

In October 2020, Anwar met the King claiming to have secured a formidable majority though this was not immediately endorsed by the monarch. That in effect, affirmed the Muhyiddin administration.

Complexity of Emergency Rule

In the same month, the King and his fellow rulers rejected Muhyiddin's request to declare an emergency ostensibly meant to enable the government to control the COVID-19 outbreak. In [January 2021](#), Muhyiddin appealed again for emergency rule. The King's assent this time was widely seen as Muhyiddin's political lifeline, allowing him to suspend parliament and enact laws without legislative approval.

Muhyiddin's hold on a parliamentary majority had come into serious question. The state of emergency was imposed immediately after [two](#) UMNO lawmakers withdrew support from the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government. Critics argue that Muhyiddin has abused the vast powers of the emergency rule to shield himself from a no-confidence vote.

The King's initial decision to reject the request for the emergency was seemingly aligned with public sentiment since there was broad support for his position. However, his inability to reject Muhyiddin the second time demonstrated the limits of the royalty's constitutional power vis-à-vis the prime minister.

As COVID-19 cases rise and the economy falters, the PN government has faced an intense public backlash over the last few months. The public implored the royalty, with its moral authority, to intervene and check the government. The royalty also came under strong [criticism](#) on social media platforms, especially from younger ethnic Malays.

Confronted by unprecedented pressure from Opposition camps and civil society, the King and his fellow rulers publicly called for a return to the legislative process. In a special statement on 16 June, the monarch urged parliament to reconvene "as soon as possible".

Significance of Monarchy's Recent Statements

In Malaysia's constitutional monarchy system, nine Malay state rulers rotate to serve as king for five-year terms. The monarchy holds the constitutionally enshrined status as protectors of the Malay culture and Islam in Malaysia.

The 16 June statement from the national palace calling on parliament to reconvene with haste came after the King hosted a special Conference of Rulers' meeting with the eight Malay state rulers. The outcome of the King's initiative to call the meeting had buoyed public confidence in the royalty.

Following the special meeting, a separate [statement](#) was issued by the brother rulers

advising against the extension of the nationwide state of emergency, due to expire on 1 August.

While both the statements emphasised the urgent sitting of parliament, the statement by the rulers was more incisively phrased than the King's. The monarch's statement [kept mum](#) on the matter of extending the state of emergency. This was notable because it is only the King who can assent or reject the government's advice on the emergency.

Royal Pushback

While acknowledging the royal statements, Muhyiddin had initially been [unclear](#) on when exactly parliament would be reconvened. Without oversight from parliament, the PN government, under the National Recovery Plan, was [planning](#) to tap into Malaysia's RM17 billion National Trust Fund, largely generated from petroleum revenue, to pay for vaccinations and related expenses.

On 30 June, the King followed through with an urgent meeting with the Speakers of the Lower and Upper Houses. Following the meeting, the monarch [reiterated](#) his call for parliament to reconvene, to debate two bills on the emergency before 1 August.

Opposition politicians were quick to [assert](#) that any excuse to delay the reconvening of parliament would be an affront to the monarch and would "besmirch the nobility and wisdom of the royal institution".

The recent statements by Malaysian royalty have shattered conventions and served to put Muhyiddin in check. Soon enough, the premier reversed his previous timeline to reconvene parliament and yielded to open the federal legislature in July instead.

While constitutionally, it is the prime minister's prerogative to advise the King on when parliament ought to be reconvened, the assertions of the Malaysian royalty carry a certain gravitas that had the embattled prime minister defied it, he would have borne a colossal political cost.

Repercussions for Muhyiddin

PN has been more insecure than ever after the president of UMNO, the backbone of PN, [announced](#) the party's withdrawal of support for Muhyiddin and called for his resignation on 8 July.

MPs within UMNO appear split on the Supreme Council decision and some may choose to continue supporting Muhyiddin along with other MPs not from the coalition. But with two seats in the 222-strong parliament vacant, only four UMNO lawmakers need to desert Muhyiddin for the [current coalition](#) to fall. UMNO has 38 MPs. Still, the premier may lead a minority government if no other candidate has majority support.

Until recently, Muhyiddin had managed to leverage the fragmentation of Malaysia's Opposition and his coalition partner, UMNO, to his advantage. Despite navigating a global pandemic with a precarious government, Muhyiddin has so far managed to maintain power.

Whether the weakened PM remains in office or he is replaced by a compromise candidate from UMNO or from the Opposition, Malaysian politics is likely to remain unstable and the King will be forced time and again to assert his position within the country's political life.

The monarchy is expected to be apolitical, and the King is obliged to abide by the government's advice in executing most of his constitutional duties. Given that the prime minister's parliamentary majority in the past had always been clear, the King's role had largely been ceremonial. This is no longer the case.

The King is being called upon by partisans to take their side, and by the public to return a modicum of stability to Malaysian politics. He walks a tightrope: he has to make political judgements, consider public sentiment and his brother rulers' views, and must make monumental decisions within the bounds of the constitution.

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