

GE14 & Its Aftermath - Enter Malaysia' s New Political Order

Yang Razali Kassim

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GE14 & Its Aftermath

Enter Malaysia's New Political Order

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Days after the political earthquake of a general election on 9 May, Anwar Ibrahim declared Malaysia "on the verge of a new golden era". Will it be a mere change of government or a political transition to a new order?

Commentary

IN THE WAKE of the seismic change that was Malaysia's 14th general election on 9 May 2018, two aftershocks are now playing out. The first, amid the euphoria of victory, sees the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition taking ground-breaking but cautious steps to put in place not just a new government but also the seeds of what could be a new political order. The second, as part of this changed landscape, sees the defeated Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition bracing for an unfamiliar and uncertain future, with its anchor party, UMNO, under threat of deregistration.

These two aftershocks are moving in tandem as they usher in Malaysia's new era. Uniquely this post-BN, post-UMNO phase of the country's political evolution is being led by two colourful personalities who have become national icons but were once allies turned rivals and now allies again – Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim. It was their statesmanly act of transcending their bitter differences in favour of political reconciliation that launched not just a Malay tsunami but a "people's tsunami" that toppled the old order. It was a titanic feat that finally removed the surprisingly indefatigable former prime minister Najib Razak and, in a historic move, ended the 60-year dominance of UMNO. The road ahead for Malaysian politics will be one of evolution and change.

Rise of Malaysia's New Order

With hindsight, the end of the UMNO era and the birth of what essentially is the Reformasi Era would not have been possible without the partnership of the two giants of Malaysian politics; Mahathir and Anwar compromised for the sake of a revolutionary change via the ballot box. Ironically, it was Mahathir who embraced Anwar's *Reformasi* or Reformation battle cry and led the movement for reform with the single-minded mission to remove the scandal-tainted Najib while Anwar remained in jail, waiting for his impending release, but providing crucial moral support from behind bars.

Still, the rise of this new order has been marked by four halting starts, reflecting how unfamiliar everyone was with the new landscape and the adjustments they each had to make as they pushed ahead to fulfil their electoral "10 Promises in 100 days".

Mahathir's Swearing-in

In the first, following PH's securing of a simple majority on 9 May, coalition leaders pushed for an immediate swearing-in of Mahathir as the new prime minister, out of fear Najib might try to stymie it. Delays in announcing the results gave rise to rampant talk that Najib was trying to snatch away victory; indeed he claimed an inconclusive simple majority which he said must be resolved by the monarch, the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong. It was only into the wee hours of the next morning that PH was officially declared the winner, paving the way for Mahathir to be sworn in - to much relief of many.

That was only the beginning. Determining who from PH would be prime minister wasn't so smooth-sailing either. The King called in the four presidents of the PH component parties, though not Mahathir, reviving fears of a move to bypass the PH victory. News came out later that the monarch had offered the premiership to PKR's leader Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, further raising anxieties. She declined, respecting the PH pact to appoint Mahathir as the seventh prime minister; upon his swearing-in, Mahathir was to seek a royal pardon for Anwar, to whom Mahathir will make way as prime minister within two years.

It was when Wan Azizah declined that the King accepted PH's joint stand in favour of Mahathir. On the night of 10 May, the 92-year-old former premier was finally sworn in - in the most spectacular comeback by the world's oldest prime minister, having been premier for 22 illustrious years from 1982 to 2003.

Cabinet Formation

The third faltering was over the formation of the new cabinet. Mahathir moved swiftly to set up the first Pakatan Harapan government. The four-party PH alliance had agreed that they would be guided by the decision-making principle of consultation and consensus. Mahathir announced the first three senior ministers – for finance, home affairs, and defence – apparently without the benefit of Anwar's input, despite him being de facto leader of the largest bloc in the victorious coalition, PKR.

One vocal PKR leader, Rafizi Ramli, felt that Mahathir had "bulldozed" the decision on the top three ministers and went public with a statement. There was some controversy whether he was rightly informed about the manner in which the decision was reached.

Subsequently, however, Mahathir visited Anwar in the hospital where the PKR leader was recuperating.

As surprising as Rafizi's public airing was, it seemed to have reminded Mahathir that he was now in the post-UMNO era where the ruling coalition was one of equals and consensus building rather than unilateral decision-making should be the norm. In their hospital meeting, Anwar conveyed his "strong support" for Mahathir's leadership while stressing his party's sentiment on the importance of "more inclusive negotiations".

Anwar's Delayed Pardon

The fourth bump on the road was over the pardon and release of Anwar, the prime minister-in-waiting. This was a key goal for PH right from the start which Mahathir has stuck to. When the time came for the Pardons Board to meet on 15 May, however, it was delayed because the controversial pro-Najib Attorney-General Apandi Ali was relieved of his duties and his role in the Pardons Board replaced by the Solicitor-General.

The side-effect of what was a procedural delay was to trigger talk that Anwar's release might not be taking place soon enough. Such rumours caused some unnecessary anxiety in PKR. In fact, contrary to speculation, the King himself had been eager to pardon and release Anwar without further hesitation, according to a source close to the process.

While stressing that the royal pardon would remain on track, Mahathir wanted the formal process of pardon to be followed. Although this pushed back the pardon by a day, Anwar was indeed finally released on 16 May after an audience with the monarch. A freed Anwar later openly thanked the King for his "complete and unconditional pardon" – wiping out all records associated with his jailing – as well as to Mahathir for actively pursuing his release.

The Future of Umno

On the other end, heads began to roll in UMNO, the first being Najib's. Under pressure, he immediately stepped down as president, taking responsibility for the unprecedented defeat. Najib now faces the prospect of being arrested on charges relating to the massive 1MDB scandal, declared Mahathir. Indeed, the former attorney-general Gani Patail admitted to Mahathir that it was true he was preparing charges against Najib, then the sitting prime minister, when he was removed as AG on grounds of "ill-health".

Najib's successor in UMNO, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, and the presumptive new deputy president Hishamuddin Hussein, will now have to preside over the possible deregistration of UMNO. The group of members behind a legal suit has not given up; it may appeal the judgement by the High Court which threw out the group's claim that UMNO had breached its own constitution by failing to hold party elections. This is all like *deja vu*.

In 1988, UMNO had been deregistered for a similar reason under the watch of Mahathir who was then prime minister. UMNO survived that shock when Mahathir

revived it by forming a “New UMNO” that eventually took on the persona of the original UMNO. Should it fail this second time, UMNO as a party may not recover.

In this struggle for survival, UMNO's future is totally uncertain. Remaining members could end up joining either PKR, the Islamist PAS, or Bersatu – Mahathir's party. This prospect itself will throw up its own dynamic. The new party leader, Zahid, has been given the mandate to open up all options, including to “negotiate to form government or opposition blocs”.

UMNO is realistic enough to know that it will face “two giants in Malaysian politics”, in the words of Khairy Jamaluddin, the UMNO Youth leader. Being in opposition is not a role UMNO is used to, at all – until the fateful day of 9 May 2018.

Road Ahead

In a nutshell, how the post-UMNO era will look like will be shaped by events and their dynamics on these two tracks – first, the new ruling group as defined by Pakatan Harapan, and second, the Opposition front as defined by UMNO. This evolution will ultimately determine whether what emerges eventually is a mere political transition to a new government, or a longer-term systemic change ushering in a new Reformasi Order.

In hindsight, this Reformasi (or Reform) Order grew from the seed Anwar planted when he was sacked in 1998, ironically by Mahathir. As Anwar himself said in one of his post-release statements, “one election does not a democracy make”. Barring unforeseen circumstances, it will be a new era in which Anwar will finally dominate, in part thanks to the pay-back by Mahathir.

Yang Razali Kassim is Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This is the first of a special RSIS Series on Malaysia's 14th General Election and Its Aftermath.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg