Democratic Backsliding & New Autocrats in Asia

During the so-called “Third Wave of Democratization” that swept Asia beginning in the 1980s, there was widespread optimism that democracy was developing deep roots in the region. But with growing rivalry between China and the US, and changing political dynamics in many countries in Asia, there are now growing fears of democratic backsliding throughout the region.

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Race and Religion
In Command: Malaysia
Returns to Identity Politics

By James Chin

The stunning events of late February in Malaysia led to the downfall of the coalition that took power in May 2018 in what had been hailed as a victory for reform. With Mahathir Mohamad out as prime minister and Anwar Ibrahim as far from power as ever, an old-school Malay politician, Muhyiddin Yassin, was sworn in as prime minister on March 1.

The political whirlwind cleared the way for the United Malays National Organisation and its allies, all Malay and Muslim parties, to regain power.

The failure of the reform government to last even two years can be traced to old rivalries, inexperience and the rise of political Islam, writes James Chin.

ON MARCH 1, Muhyiddin Yassin was sworn in as Malaysia’s eighth prime minister. He took over from Mahathir Mohamad after a week of high political drama. The whole incident was a complete surprise to many people outside Malaysia, which had gone through its first-ever regime change in May 2018. Those who fervently believed that Malaysia was finally on its way to joining the club of newly democratizing countries now seem sadly mistaken.

So how did this happen? While things are still unfolding in Malaysia, I would like to argue that regime change 22 months ago did not fundamentally lead to any reforms of the country’s historical racial and religious tensions. This divide could largely explain why the country reversed itself so quickly and in such dramatic fashion. I will conclude by providing some important lessons to be learned from the Malaysian experience.

Mahathir had resigned on Feb. 24, and was appointed interim prime minister from that point forward. Then began a mad rush to put together a new coalition government. The contenders were initially Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition leader who had been promised the job by Mahathir when the two joined forces in 2018 to try to unseat the ruling coalition that had led the country since independence. On Feb. 29, the Malaysian king, who formally names prime ministers, announced that he had picked Muhyiddin over the other two, and Muhyiddin was sworn in the next day.

Muhyiddin’s new ruling coalition, called Perikatan Nasional (PN, or National Alliance) consists of three core parties: the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Parti Islam Malaysia (PAS) and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM, or United Indigenous Party). This combination is significant for a simple reason: all three parties represent the Malay and Muslim population. UMNO and PPBM are essentially the same with a similar ideology of Malay nationalism and Malay supremacy. In fact, PPBM is an offshoot of UMNO. The party was established by Mahathir for the specific purpose of beating UMNO, and most of its leadership are former UMNO personnel. PAS, while supporting Malay nationalism, also wants to create an Islamic state. Thus, for all intents and purpose, the new Malaysian government is a Malay-centric nationalist government.

The contrast with the government it replaced, Pakatan Harapan (or Alliance of Hope) could not be greater. It was led by Mahathir and consisted of four parties; PPBM, Anwar’s Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, or People’s Justice Party), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah, or National Trust). In Pakatan Harapan, PPBM represented Malay nationalism and Amanah represented moderate Islamists. While PKR and DAP are officially multi-racial parties, in practice PKR is also seen as a Malay-majority party while DAP is supported mainly by the Chinese community with a small number of Indians. Thus, despite what its detractors said about Pakatan Harapan being led by a 94-year-old and the world’s oldest elected prime minister, it was multiracial and reflected Malaysian society. About one-third of its elected MPs were non-Malays.

MALAY SUPREMACY

Malaysia’s population can roughly be divided into 55 percent Malay, 25 percent Chinese, 7 percent Indian and the others mostly indigenous peoples of Borneo. Since independence, there have been political tensions between Malays (who are constitutionally considered Muslims and cannot change religion) and non-Malays. When Malaysia saw its first regime change on May 9, 2018, the news was greeted with celebration by many people around the world as a triumph of democracy. Most scholars had regarded the UMNO-led coalition Barisan Nasional (National Front), in power since 1957, as one of the world’s most stable one-party-dominant regimes. Through a mixture of authoritarian rule, ethnic and religious politics and electoral manipulation, Barisan Nasional had won every election prior to 2018.

UMNO ruled Malaysia based on the concept of ketuanan Melayu (“Malay supremacy”). This Malay-first ideology, colloquially called “Malay special rights,” in practice meant the Malay community became the beneficiary of an extensive affirmative action policy, even though Malays were the majority. These benefits include quotas in business licenses, discounts for new houses, preference in securing government jobs, and so on; there is even a special university that only takes in Malays and other indigenous students. The system resulted in UMNO itself becoming synonymous with crony capitalism and money politics. The ultimate example of this was the massive 1MDB scandal involving a government investment fund and Najib Razak, the former UMNO prime minister, who had $620 million deposited into his personal account.

Public outrage over the 1MDB debacle gave Mahathir, who had broken earlier with UMNO, the opening he needed to change the government. Yet, despite great hopes and the promise of reforms, the Pakatan Harapan government fell within two years. What happened and what lessons can we learn? I would argue there were three undercurrents. First, the rise of ketuanan Islam Melayu (“Malay Islamic supremacy”) ideology...
If there is a single lesson from the Malaysian case, it may be that for countries experiencing a first regime change, the most important thing is to ditch the old political idioms and institute deep reforms immediately. Significant reforms become harder and harder as time marches on and political will dissipates.

THE RISE OF KETUANAN ISLAM MELAYU
Prior to 2018, the UMNO/Barisan Nasional government flirted with political Islam. UMNO initially wanted to use Islam as a political weapon against Parti Islam Malaysia (PAS), its most direct political challenger. For decades, PAS’s message of turning Malaysia into an Islamic state gained ground as the Malay Muslim population became increasingly conservative. UMNO, however, was uncomfortable with pursuing an Islamic state agenda given that its founding philosophy was firmly based on ketuanan Melayu, an ideology akin to ethnic nationalism with a minor Islamic component. While UMNO paid lip service to upholding Islam’s dominance, it was understood in UMNO circles that Malay nationalism was the key driver and that Malaysia was not an Islamic state constitutionally.

In September 2019, with Pakatan Harapan in power, the unthinkable happened. UMNO and PAS came together in a political pact called Mukafat Nasional (“National Consensus”). This would not have happened if UMNO were still in power. This pact was intended to combine Malay nationalists with the Islamic vote in a single bloc to defeat Pakatan Harapan in the next general election. By extension, the combination of the core ideology of PAS and UMNO resulted in ketuanan Islam Melayu.

UMNO/PAS won three consecutive by-elections in 2019 despite Najib being charged with corruption. In all three by-elections, the Malay vote for the Pakatan Harapan coalition went down significantly, suggesting that Malay voters were losing faith in its administration. UMNO/PAS’s simple narrative proved effective, claiming that the Pakatan Harapan government was controlled by the Chinese and working toward ending Malay special rights. It had no answer for this, even though it was blatantly untrue.

One of the key consequences of the rise of the UMNO/PAS pact and the ketuanan Islam Melayu narrative is that it pushed Pakatan Harapan to the right. Mahathir was afraid of losing support among Malays, and hence as the new face of UMNO/PAS took hold among Malays, the Malay elements in the alliance began to backtrack on reforms and push for more Malay-centric policies. In other words, they ended up playing UMNO/PAS’s political game, to the detriment of the Pakatan Harapan coalition.

LACK OF EXPERIENCE AND COHESION
When the four Pakatan Harapan parties got into government, only one-quarter of the ministers had any experience in government. Aside from learning how to run the civil service, they faced resistance from civil servants who were largely loyal to the old regime. Many policies adopted by the new government were not implemented properly due to sabotage by the civil service. The four parties also did not really co-ordinate their policies. Each party had its own political agenda and ministers contradicted each other in public. DAP, the Chinese-based party, was in political conflict with PPRM, the Malay party, on many policies, especially in the economic arena and on pro-Malay affirmative action policies. Although they tried to hide these conflicts, the tensions began to affect the entire government.
An example of this was over Lynas, an Australian company producing rare-earth minerals. Some ministers supported working with the company while others wanted the company to wind up its operations on environmental grounds.

The single biggest political issue behind the fall of the Pakatan Harapan government, however, was the unresolved tension between Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim. Prior to the 2018 elections, Mahathir had agreed to serve for two years before handing over the prime minister’s office to Anwar. The deadline was May 2020. The reasons for such an arrangement were clear: Mahathir’s advanced age — he will be 95 years old this year; and a change of leadership around that time would provide a sufficient period for settling into office before the next general election, due in 2023. Anwar’s supporters initially sang the praises of the Pakatan Harapan government, however, for reasons outlined above, Mahathir’s advanced age is unfair and does not give enough incentives to politicians to reach out beyond just appealing to one specific ethnic and religious group. The lack of political will and fear led directly to the Pakatan Harapan government backtracking on the ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, even after Mahathir announced that Malaysia would sign it at a UN speech. UMNO/PAS organized massive rallies and said the convention would take away Malay “special rights” and the powers of the Malay sultans. The government backed down.

• First, Malaysia did not change its electoral system. The main service-delivery agent to the people and it directly reflects the power structure of the country. At present, more than 80 percent of the civil servants in Malaysia are ethnic Malays. This goes up to more than 90 percent in the upper echelons of the service. It needs to be more diverse and one way to do this is by recruiting more non-Malays over a period of time. Over time, this will strengthen the service and break the current civil service mentality that Malaysia is a country of Malays and Muslims only.
• Second, wholesale reform of the Malaysia bureaucracy. Like the civil service in most parts of Southeast Asia, the Malaysian civil service is the main service-delivery agent to the people and it directly reflects the power structure of the country. At present, more than 80 percent of the civil servants in Malaysia are ethnic Malays. This goes up to more than 90 percent in the upper echelons of the service. It needs to be more diverse and one way to do this is by recruiting more non-Malays over a period of time. Over time, this will strengthen the service and break the current civil service mentality that Malaysia is a country of Malays and Muslims only.
• One priority area in the civil service is the “Islamic” bureaucracy, commonly referred to as JAKIM. This is responsible for implementing Islamic rules and regulations in every aspect of Malay life — from Sharia courts to overseeing the Islamic curriculum in all government schools to the Friday sermons read out in all mosques in the country. In recent years, evidence has mounted that JAKIM is involved in spewing hate against Christians, Jews and other groups while reinforcing the intolerant ideology of ketuanan Islam Melayu via the Friday sermons.
• Third, legislation dealing with hate speech. At present, many right-wing Malay Islamic groups openly spread hatred toward non-Malays and non-Islamic religions. There is also the issue of double standards. If a non-Muslim comments negatively on any aspect of Islam, the Islamic authorities, often with the support of the police, arrest the individual. This is often not the case if Islamic groups attack other religions. There are many instances of police reluctance to act against Islamic groups or openly siding with Islamic groups when they attack other religions.

LESSONS AND CONCLUSION
The 2018 regime change offered Malaysia a unique chance to reset its political system and allow for democracy after living under one-party rule for six decades. Many argued that it would take time to institute reforms because the political roadblocks are formidable, especially given the solid block of Malay Muslims who use race and religion to block change. Others argued that reforms would only be possible after Mahathir passed the baton to Anwar Ibrahim.

Unfortunately, time ran out. The right-wing Malay elements in Pakatan Harapan felt that they were losing support among the wider Malay population and decided to join forces with UMNO/PAS. The reality is that the coalition government wasted the first two years of its historical mandate. Instead of bold reforms, it became a hostage to the politics of ketuanan Islam Melayu pursued by the opposition.

There are important lessons to be learned. First, if there is a single lesson from the Malaysian case, it may be that for countries experiencing a first regime change, the most important thing is to ditch the old political idioms and institute deep reforms immediately. Significant reforms become harder and harder as time marches on and political will dissipates.

Second, if a new administration consists of a coalition, then there must be solid agreement on a roadmap and the political will to carry it through. The first year appears to be crucial. In the case of Pakatan Harapan, each of the parties basically did their own thing in government. Worse, the most important element in the coalition, the timetable for handing power from Mahathir to Anwar, was abandoned by Mahathir within the first year.

Third, the issue of race and religion. In Malaysia, the ideology of ketuanan Islam Melayu was simply too strong. In societies that are divided by race and religion, the lesson here is that this issue must be tackled from day one of a new administration. The mistake made by Pakatan Harapan was that it let UMNO/PAS set the narrative that Malaysia was losing political power.

The government’s collapse is a tragedy not only for the millions of Malaysians who voted for change but, far more importantly, for millions of other people who are living in similar conditions. They may be thinking now that a change of government will not necessarily lead to better outcomes. This is especially true in Muslim-majority countries. Malaysia has been fairly well known among Islamic countries as successful and stable politically. This is no longer the case.

James Chin is Professor of Asian Studies, University of Tasmania.