



Anti Government supporters demonstrates in Kuala Lumpur.

Photo Credit: The Malaysian Insider

Some reflections on ‘Future of Malaysian democracy’

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Dr. Mohamed Nawab Osman’s “Future of Malaysian democracy” raises a number of important issues on the subject, several of which require more clarification and context.

Analysts may argue that while Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad’s call for a parliamentary vote of no confidence against Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is certainly the first of its kind by a former prime minister, it is not an opposition cause per se because it is not a partisan objective. The very fact that such a vote — or even a motion to be tabled realistically — requires bipartisan, or multiparty, support testifies to its non-partisan nature. Other vocal individuals within Barisan Nasional (BN) parties have also made the call, and Mahathir, being a former prime minister, is only the most prominent.

Despite its uniqueness, Mahathir’s action also need not be as momentous as it has been made out to be. Any reconfiguration of political alliances in Malaysia impacting on the future of its politics, as the article puts it, would be a much larger undertaking that will require more by way of motivating factors or forces. Mahathir’s action may be a part of that, but it is most unlikely to have that effect on its own.

IMDB’s (IMalaysia Development Berhad) allegedly missing RM 42 billion remains debatable. While critics assert the disappearance, IMDB and the government insist the funds are still in other asset forms, or the missing quantum is considerably less. Just what and how much are actually missing still need to be ascertained in a full and impartial inquiry.

Serious doubts also remain about the prospects of the new Islamist party, Parti Amanah Nasional (PAN), which has effectively replaced PAS by capturing Malay support for the new opposition pact Pakatan Rakyat 2.0. Nobody can really know for certain because it is still too early to tell. There is little or no optimism in Malaysia — not even from spin effect — that PAN will be up to the task even though that possibility remains open.

Outside UMNO, considerable Malay support is still with PAS or Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Since the split within PAS — over tactics rather than ideology — its less conservative wing that was ousted at a party congress then formed Gerakan Harapan Baru (GHB, or New Hope Movement) as precursor of PAN. The new political force

has stirred doubts about its endurance, capacity and appeal to Islamists even, or particularly, after it pledged to open its membership to non-Muslims.

The whole issue of the degree of Malay participation in BERSIH 4 remains contentious. Rally supporters cite a significant degree of Malay participation, particularly on the second day on August 30, whereas federal government publicists and pundits have downplayed such significance and even racialize the event as a largely ethnic Chinese exercise. Certainly BERSIH 4's purpose was no more racial than any of BERSIH's three previous outings. One common view is that many Malays stayed away for fear of racial conflict given efforts to racialize the rally, and after efforts by UMNO and PAS to ban members from it. But after the first day saw no incident, more Malays turned up on the second day.

Hardly anyone regards Pakatan Rakyat (PR) as having "failed to galvanize the Malays," as the article says. They have succeeded, if anything only too well for UMNO's liking, as reflected in multiracial support for an unprecedented number of PR seats in parliament since the 2013 general election. PR does not seem to have succeeded in galvanizing much Malay support for the BERSIH 4 rally probably because they never really tried. BERSIH 4 and PR 2.0 are quite different entities with different ends and means as well as different leaders and administrative systems, such that they are neither synonymous with each other nor interchangeable.

True, the Mahathir-Muhyiddin faction — if it exists — in UMNO is unlikely to agree to Anwar's release from prison, much less to the prospect of his becoming prime minister. This would be the "price" of PR 2.0 delivering all its constituent parties' votes in parliament to achieve a successful no-confidence motion. But PR 2.0 is at least as eager as anyone else to get the vote through, and preconditions may stall or jeopardize the process. Indeed any concessions for Anwar have been in the backburner. Even Azmin Ali, Anwar's long-time lieutenant and now Selangor Chief Minister, only mentioned Anwar's release as a possible condition in response to a question to that effect, and after his PKR colleague Rafizi Ramli had started drafting the no-confidence motion.

The current situation in Malaysia does not stem from the 2013 general election when BN lost the popular vote. That dented BN's prestige in governing without necessarily precipitating a crisis of political legitimacy, particularly when the alarming loss then was suffered by BN coalition partner MCA rather than UMNO itself. Granted that was the lowest level BN's popularity had sunk to, but governments in many other countries continue to govern despite losing the popular vote since only parliamentary seats are decisive. Gerrymandering and allegations of it are neither uncommon nor unique. Today's crisis of legitimacy in Malaysia focused on UMNO has quite different and more recent origins.

UMNO's patronage system and the state of the opposition are not the only conditions challenging Najib's tenure. Other challenges include a split in UMNO party ranks, continued withering attacks by Mahathir and his allies, non-partisan public opinion, unprecedented international pressure, several lawsuits in train (including for the allegedly excessive use of election campaign funds, and the allegedly improper dismissal of dissenting UMNO members), and ever sophisticated and widespread "new media" use. The challenges to Najib's continued tenure as

PM are therefore greater than at first supposed, meaning that political survival would be an even greater achievement while failure would have well-grounded reasons.

