

Malaysia's Opposition Faces Increasing Tension

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A charismatic leader faces sexual perversion charges and a state coalition shows signs of coming apart.

Pakatan Rakyat, the unlikely opposition coalition that ended the Malaysian national ruling coalition's 50-year grip on absolute power last March, faces the apparent collapse of its majority in the northern state of Perak and the possible trial, starting tomorrow, of its leader, Anwar Ibrahim, on sexual perversion charges.

In addition to Anwar's troubles, the Pakatan coalition appeared about to be thrown out of power in Perak Wednesday after several state representatives quit the coalition amid rumors of widespread offers of favors to engineer defections to the Barisan Nasional, the ruling national coalition, which almost immediately said it would seek to form a government in the state. In the tumultuous March 2008 election, Pakatan Rakyat won five state government majorities and the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur. Loss of the Perak government would be a major blow to the opposition.

In response to the events, Mohd Nizar Jamaluddin, the Perak chief minister, told reporters he would consult with Sultan Aslan Shah in an attempt to block the Barisan and dissolve the state assembly as a prelude to calling a snap election. With the events that took place later in the day, it was unclear whether he would have the forces left to remain in power.

Najib Tun Razak, the deputy prime minister, held a press conference Wednesday evening to say that while the two opposing sides were tied 28-28 in the state assembly, he expected others to defect, and that the Barisan Nasional would seek to form a state government. The developments represent a singular triumph for the Barisan, after two demoralizing losses in by-elections — one that brought Anwar to power, and a second loss in January in Kuala Terengganu.

The events started earlier this week, when two Perak state representatives, Jamaluddin Mohd Radzi and Osman Jailu, both of PKR, resigned from the coalition and Hee Yit Foong, a member of the Democratic Action Party, quit Wednesday. At best, the departure of the three would leave the coalition with a bare one-seat majority in the state assembly after 10 months in power in the state. With the rumored departure of others, it was becoming increasingly clear that the government was collapsing.

In addition, Anwar Ibrahim is due to go on trial on February 5, on charges of having sodomized a 23-year-old former aide, Saiful Bukhari Azlan, last July. It is the second such charge against Anwar, the first in 1998 after Anwar broke with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who sacked the then-deputy prime minister and finance minister and expelled him from UMNO. Anwar's subsequent sodomy conviction was later overturned after the current prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, succeeded Mahathir, but not before Anwar had served six years in prison. Anwar was also jailed on corruption charges brought by Mahathir. Those charges were not overturned. Anwar and his

followers have complained that both sets of charges were trumped up to attempt to end his once-promising political career.

Could the coalition recreate the victory in Perak? If they get the chance, as with everything in Malaysia, the state's racial composition will play a role. The state, once one of the world's richest tin-mining areas, has a population of about 2 million, with ethnic Malays in a thin majority of about 54 percent. Another 32 percent are Chinese and 13 percent Indian, both of which are likely to vote with the opposition parties.

Against this, there has been rising Malay irritation over what ethnic Malays see as too many favors being bestowed on the Chinese. In particular, Raja Nazrin Shah, the widely-respected crown prince, has spoken out against what many see as Chinese usurpation of sensitive Malay rights.

However, the ruling Barisan Nasional, the ethnic coalition that has run the country since its founding in 1959, faces at least as much trouble if not more. Its leader, Najib, who is due to step in after United Malays National Organization elections in March as prime minister, is unpopular among rank-and-file Malays, partly because he is tied to Badawi, who is widely viewed as having failed as prime minister, and partly because Najib has been at the center of a series of procurement scandals as defence minister, a post he gave up last year. There have also been repeated allegations that he was involved, peripherally or otherwise, in the murder of an attractive Mongolian translator, Altantuya Shaariibuu, in October 2006.

Two of Najib's bodyguards and his best friend were put on trial for the murder in one of the longest court cases ever conducted in Malaysia. The friend, Abdul Razak Baginda, who admittedly had been Altantuya's lover, was acquitted of ordering the murder in a decision that drew considerable criticism. The two bodyguards remain on trial. Shortly before the end of January, it was reported that Musa Safri, Najib's chief of staff, had told the bodyguards to "do something" about the 27-year-old woman, who by her own admission had been blackmailing Abdul Razak. However, neither Musa nor Najib has been asked to testify in the trial. In a procedural motion, the judge in the case refused to allow Musa's cautioned statement to be introduced into court testimony. On Wednesday, Siral Azhar Umar, one of the two bodyguards, broke down on the witness stand as he read his final 15-page statement over the case, pleading with the judge not to convict him as he was made a scapegoat to "cover up for certain parties." He did not name the parties.

The government has also been handicapped by a flagging economy and rising unemployment. The jobless rate is expected to double to 6 percent this year as the country's export-led growth could fall as low as 1.5 percent from 5.5 percent in 2008. As late as November, officials were predicting growth of about 5 percent. Intel recently closed its East Malaysia factory and furloughed 5,000 workers. Panasonic and others have also announced plant closures. Tens of thousands of foreign workers are expected to be sent packing although it is questionable whether Malaysians themselves will take the jobs.

In an effort to prime the pump, the government is expected to introduce a RM7 billion spending package at some point in February after a previous RM7 package in November, pushing up the government's budget surplus to as high as 7.4 percent of gross domestic product by 2010. Despite the rising deficit, the country's large current account surplus and foreign reserves supply a substantial cushion, however.

With UMNO split by factionalism as forces aligned with Najib and Badawi on one side joust for party seats with forces aligned with former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and party infighting on the increase, the government has been criticized for being too slow to implement spending projects that would produce jobs. There is also concern that the stimulus plan will be directed to UMNO

cronies in an effort to shore up Najib's intra-party support, rather than being targeted to producing the biggest bang for the buck.

These issues are expected to play out in Perak, where the rich tin resource is long gone, and the economic downturn is expected to bite. With the opposition in control of the state and facing criticism for not doing enough to stimulate the economy, that is balanced by lack of enthusiasm for the national ruling coalition, which is regarded as ineffective as well.

In the meantime, Pakatan's three disparate parties - urban Malays vs. fundamentalist Malays vs. Chinese chauvinists on one side, and warring factions in UMNO plus the Malaysian Chinese Association, which was reduced to near irrelevance in last year's election on the other, Perak's politics look to be more than entertaining.

P.S.

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