

A State Coup Kicks off a Malaysian Melee

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Maybe the ouster of a state government might not be such a good idea

Malaysia is bracing for demonstrations by both opposition and government supporters over the weekend after the collapse of one of the opposition's five state governments was engineered by the Barisan Nasional, the dominant ruling coalition, resulted in pitched battles in Perak between riot police and opposition supporters Friday.

Perak's chief minister, Mohd Nizar Jamaluddin, at first refused to leave his office Friday despite being ordered to by Sultan Raja Azlan Shah, the tin-rich state's titular head, then gave a fiery speech in which he promised to fight until the last drop of blood to keep his office.

Unfazed, Azlan Shah agreed to the appointment of Zambry Abdul Kadir as the new chief minister after the Barisan announced that it had not only the support of 28 state lawmakers but three independents who quit the opposition coalition that had controlled the statehouse after March 2008 elections. Zambry is scheduled to be sworn in tomorrow in what promises to be a tumultuous day.

The reaction was immediate on Friday, with thousands of rank and file members of the Pakatan Rakyat national opposition coalition, which controlled the Perak assembly, marching on Azlan Shah's royal palace in Kuala Kangsar, where Field Reserve Unit troops fired tear gas at them. Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim said he would organize further demonstrations, barnstorming across the country to rally support, over the weekend.

Almost certainly, the Perak events guarantee a continuing period of instability in Malaysia, which is increasingly hard hit by the economic downturn. Both the Barisan and the Pakatan opposition are increasingly regarded by the country's beleaguered citizens as squabbling over the spoils of power rather than making progress on the country's economic ills. UBS, the investment bank, recently forecast that the country would slip into recession although government officials are still expecting positive growth.

The opposition is made up of three widely disparate parties - the rural fundamentalist PAS, the Chinese quasi-socialist Democratic Action Party, and the predominantly urban Malay Parti Keadilan Rakyat. After ruling the Perak state for 10 months, four Pakatan state lawmakers resigned earlier this week from the coalition because of a combination of resentment and impatience with the Pakatan leadership. Rumors of payoffs to induce changes were rampant. Although Pakatan Rakyat supporters threatened legal action against the Sultan and the national ruling coalition, the odds are that the decision won't be overturned. Azlan Shah is a former chief of the country's Supreme Court and widely respected. The Malaysian Bar Council, headed by Ambiga Sreenivasan, which has often sided with the opposition in the past, said that "Based on the Perak Constitution it is the Sultan's prerogative and it can't be challenged. There is legal opinion that this is non-justiciable."

Whatever the reasons for the collapse of the state government,, its sudden ouster represents virtually the first encouraging news the national ruling coalition, and particularly its leading component, the United Malays National Organisation, has had in nearly a year after disastrous

March 8, 2008 elections left it without a two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time in 50 years and cost the government five states.

With the decision of the sultan, one of Malaysia's most respected figures, to demand the opposition coalition's ouster from the statehouse, UMNO looks newly rejuvenated under the so-far lackluster leadership of Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, who is all but certain to take over as prime minister after UMNO elections, and the opposition, headed by onetime Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, is on the back foot. There are also widespread reports that the Barisan is trying to pry away state lawmakers to defect in Selangor, the territory that surrounds Kuala Lumpur, and in the northern state of Kedah.

Anwar's opposition coalition had enjoyed a long year of relative success, beginning with the March 8 election, which cut the Barisan's majority in the Dewan Rakyat, or parliament, to 139 to 83. Then Anwar himself handily won his by election in his old Permatang Pauh constituency in Penang, and the coalition, led by PAS, won the Kuala Terengganu by-election in January.

Anwar, however, did himself no good by promising - vainly, as it turned out - to take power as prime minister on Sept. 16 by persuading UMNO lawmakers and those from splinter parties in East Malaysia to change sides. His complaints over party-switching in Perak ring somewhat hollow.

Nonetheless, until the Perak coup, the Barisan had largely appeared to be confused and split between factions allied with former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on one side and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on the other. UMNO party elections are scheduled for March 24 through 28. And, although Najib had been anointed earlier to take over from the ousted Badawi, intensive infighting has been going on within the two factions.

Najib is the clear winner in advance of the party elections - at least in the short term, and if the Perak tension doesn't explode into violence that would bring him down - after having spent much of his prestige in a personal effort to win the Kuala Terengganu by-election and losing the race to a PAS candidate. In a poll held last week by Merdeka Research Center, Najib had a 41 percent approval rating, below even the 46 percent approval rating of Abdullah Badawi, the man the UMNO rank and file drove from the premiership because of the barisan's lackluster electoral performance in the 2008 national election and afterwards.

Depending on whether the Perak situation kicks off a period of national instability, given the low-key tension of Malaysia's racial politics, Najib's big job is to solidify his support, probably by doing away with the quota system for elections within the party and do away with special delegates who to a large extent formed a rent-seeking class that were first in line for government contracts, and making sure the spoils of governmental leadership continue to be delivered to the party wheelhorses.

P.S.

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