

Is Malaysia Teetering on the Edge of an Islamist Knife?

By [Nile Bowie](#)

Global Research, May 16, 2013

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Aside from the international media frenzy surrounding the sacking and trial of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim for sodomy, and the occasional anti-imperialist tirades of former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia has rarely made international headlines. That is partly because this resource rich multi-ethnic state has been an island of stability since its independence in 1957, preaching a moderate-brand of Islam with a steady focus on economic development.

Malaysia is unique in contrast to other states in the region and throughout the Muslim world in that it has given unprecedented cultural and religious autonomy to non-Muslim ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities who wield significant influence over the economy. Although the country has practiced participatory politics and democratic elections from its inception, the ruling party, responsible for steering all developmental efforts since independence, has never been unseated. Covering local politics in the heart of Southeast Asia is a fast-paced exercise, and in Malaysia, mistrust is rampant and grand allegations are exchanged between political factions like bank notes in a marketplace.

In the fallout of a heated election held in early May, which saw the incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak and his Barisan Nasional coalition continue its uninterrupted rule, passions are high and those of the social-media generation are advertising their discontent in the streets, thirsty to challenge the infallibility of the regime. Since his coalition failed to take power following the closest fought general election in Malaysian history, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has been leading protest rallies throughout the country alleging that the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition resorted to “massive fraud” to secure victory in the polls. Over the course of my time in Malaysia,

I have reviewed various assessments of Mr. Ibrahim; I’ve had in depth discussions with his former political allies who defected from his opposition coalition, and I’ve sat down with former PM Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the man who saw Anwar as a son, who groomed him to lead the nation, only to condemn him to political free-fall for rampant corruption and allegations that he sodomised a male aid.

No matter if they were formerly from the government or the opposition, everyone told me the same things about Anwar: that he is narcissistic chameleon, a genius of political opportunism, a master of public rallying and street-theatre, and that he has a ravenous obsession with becoming the Prime Minister of Malaysia. Months before the election Mahathir sat across from me, 87 and still sharp and healthy as ever, and told me how Anwar planned to bring down the government through street action, taking after the Arab Spring uprisings. “The opposition is already receiving money from NGOs that are financed by the US government,” hold told me. “Apparently they would like to see regime change in

Malaysia, and they have in mind someone who is known to be very pro-American and in defense of Israel.” To the average Malaysian democracy activist who is ever critical of Mahathir’s shortcomings, this rhetoric is absolute rubbish, seen as diversionary tactic to distract people from the Barisan Nasional’s own corrupt dealings and monopoly on power. Unfortunately for those activists, this author is readily convinced that the Doctor’s prescription is spot on.

Who is Anwar Ibrahim?

What I’ve observed from speaking to rally-goers and social-medialites is that most Malaysians under 30 know very little about Anwar Ibrahim’s past dealings in government, his flirtation with Wahhabi Islam, and his unabashed shoulder-rubbing with neoconservatives in the Bush administration. Anwar was a man of humble beginnings, raised by a middle-class family. From his early days in politics, he established close alliances with both Wahhabi missionaries and the Muslim Brotherhood; he called for Malaysia to be ruled by a 14th century interpretation of the Koran and sharia law. Anwar was part and parcel of Saudi Arabia’s approach to religious expansion, whereby missionaries are used to recruit Islamists in moderate Sunni states, injecting an alien brand of political Islam with the intention of undermining secular Muslim regimes. Riyadh’s drive to Arabize states in Southeast Asia had a lot to do with offsetting the influence of revolutionary Iran, which inspired much of the politically ambitious religious establishment in Malaysia and elsewhere.

Anwar was given his start in government by none other than Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. At the time, Mahathir’s biggest political competition was the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), an Islamist political party that remains a strong component in the opposition coalition even today. Mahathir brought Anwar onboard as the Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sports to offset PAS’s influence. Once in government, he began working closely with banks tied to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wahhabis to build the necessary financial resources needed for his political ascent. Anwar was promoted to Education Minister where he worked to advance the spread of Wahhabi Islamic doctrine in the schools as part of policy that attempted to re-order Malaysian society from the top down. In schools, Muslim prayers were publicly recited, sermons preached, and Islamic festivals celebrated as part of the curriculum, a far-reaching departure from the heretofore multi-ethnic character in national schools.

Mahathir allowed this on his watch, apparently to shore up his support base against PAS, who preached that Malaysia’s leadership were decadent, untrue Muslims. During his time in government, Anwar was known to have amassed a significant fortune, in the multi-millions through elite corruption and kickbacks from cronies at Petronas, the state oil company. Anwar had dealings with Al Baraka Bank, the world’s largest source of Islamic finance, which generously funded Saudi proxies and their causes from the madrassas in Pakistan to the glitzy capital cities of Southeast Asia. Anwar formed an NGO in the United States, the International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT), which labeled itself a harbinger of moderate Islam, and was utilized to influence policymakers in the US government and academia – the likes of Paul Wolfowitz, Al Gore, Dick Cheney, Grover Norquist, Bill Cohen, Richard Perle, Madeleine Albright, William Perry, Colin Powell, Richard Holbrooke – the same individuals who would cry foul and threaten Malaysia with diplomatic consequences over Anwar’s six-year detainment after being charged with corruption.

Anwar, ambitious and aspiring to unseat Mahathir, paraded himself around Washington D.C. as the ideal stooge, a force for good that stood for democracy and free markets. Jonathan Smith vividly describes how US officials “often took with them the belief that if only Anwar

were in charge in Malaysia, here at last could be a perfect Muslim democracy. American liberals – amusingly, overwhelmingly Jews – accepted Anwar’s projection at face value. To them, he was their tabula rasa: A Muslim who cared about the environment, about global peace and nuclear disarmament, about social justice – basically, about all of their core beliefs, yet never with any specific detail – Anwar was the noble savage for these men and women who likely believed Malaysia a tropical rainforest where the natives went around naked most of the time.” As time went on, Anwar embraced neoliberalism and more brazenly endorsed the values of the American establishment.

During the Asian financial crisis on 1997, Anwar implemented IMF austerity policies, including cutting government expenditures by 20 per cent, stripping funding from Mahathir’s enormous infrastructure projects that promised to bring Malaysia into the 21st century – a move that dismayed Mahathir and hastened Anwar’s departure from government, which happened dramatically in 1998. In the end, Mahathir rejected the IMF’s medicine and took credit for spearheading Malaysia’s recovery through currency controls and protectionist measures. After Anwar’s stint in prison, he based himself in Washington, where he chaired the Foundation for the Future, a US think-tank established by Elizabeth Cheney, Dick’s daughter. While Ibrahim was on trial for sodomy, Wolfowitz and Al Gore authored a joint opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal in support of Ibrahim, while the Washington Post published an editorial calling for consequences that would affect Malaysia’s relations with Washington if Ibrahim were to be found guilty. Ibrahim enraged many when he stated that he would support policy to protect the security of Israel in an interview with the Wall Street Journal; this is particularly controversial in Malaysia, where support for Palestine is largely unanimous. Malaysian political scientist Dr. Chandra Muzaffar argues:

“It is obvious that by acknowledging the primacy of Israeli security, Anwar was sending a clear message to the deep state and to Tel Aviv and Washington that he is someone that they could trust. In contrast, the [incumbent] Najib government, in spite of its attempts to get closer to Washington, remains critical of Israeli aggression and intransigence. Najib has described the Israeli government as a ‘serial killer’ and a ‘gangster’.”

Anwar Ibrahim’s closest allies outside of Washington and Riyadh are in Istanbul, where he enjoys close ties with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, both devout protégés of the House of Saud. Malaysia with Anwar Ibrahim at the helm would bare strong parallels to the political direction taken by Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party, which has steered secular Turkey’s domestic policy in a noticeably Islamist direction, while drifting steadily closer into the US-Saudi sphere of influence.

Popular Grievances & Allegations of Fraud

Because Malaysia exists as a multi-cultural and multi-religious state, both the ruling and opposition coalitions attempt to field candidates that represent the interests of the nation’s largest ethnic groups. Approximately 60 percent of Malaysians are Muslim ethnic-Malays, 25 percent are predominantly Buddhist ethnic-Chinese, and 7 percent are mostly Hindu ethnic-Indians. The main parties in the Barisan Nasional governing coalition have traditionally been the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MCI), although support has dwindled in recent times for the latter two parties. Malaysia has become politically divided, and many – especially the online-savvy middle class – feel extremely disillusioned with corruption that pervades all

levels of society, from taxi drivers and hawkers to the elite figures in business and government. Citizen equality is a major concern, especially of minorities who feel sidelined over constitutionally protected affirmative action policies that give ethnic Malays advantages in business and education. Opponents of these affirmative action policies routinely call them intentionally discriminatory, alleging they reflect a “Malay dominance” paradigm that has not been shaken from the ruling polity since independence.

Proponents of the policy argue that it was historically justified because some 60 percent of all Malays lived below the poverty line at the time of independence, and the policy is still required, as the Malay majority are still lowest income earners. It’s quite commonplace to find ethnic-Chinese Malaysians railing against their self-perceived status as “second-class citizens,” but these frustrations don’t live up to scrutiny, as the conditions Malaysia’s Chinese community are subjected to do not resemble that of a deprived community by any stretch of the imagination. The Chinese community dominates the middle and upper income earning strata, they are not hindered from attending vernacular schools in their mother tongue, from practicing their respective faiths, and they are a vibrant and active force in politics. One memorable defense of affirmative actions policies I’ve come across came from a Chinese taxi driver, who told me “If not for those policies, the Malays would be window-washers and street sweepers. How many Malays do you see with Chinese drivers?” he joked.

Activists and opposition supporters often criticize on open truth, that the mainstream media is dominated with pro-government views, with most reportage of the opposition being negative. It should also be noted however, that the opposition coalition absolutely dominates social media. The explosion of social media users, up 45% from 2008, was a critical factor in the past general election and the opposition has undeniably made its voice heard through various campaigns that have swayed a large portion of young voters. Facebook profile pictures were replaced with solid black images in protest of the prevailing status quo following the announcement of the election results, as emotional refutations of the poll results went viral, along with slogans such as “R.I.P. Democracy.” Among the poor and in the rural Malay heartlands that have traditionally been Barisan Nasional-strongholds, there is a fear of unknown political terrain that may adversely affect low-income communities, who are most vulnerable to feeling the burn if the economy is mismanaged following a political transition. Barisan Nasional retained its position thanks to support from the rural electorate who felt like the development projects and populist policies on offer were the safest bet.

The opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, currently controls three state governments and is led by Anwar Ibrahim’s Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the staunchly Islamist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), and the Chinese-led secular Democratic Action Party (DAP), the latter being by far the strongest force in the coalition, reflective in the fact that Chinese voters by and large abandoned Barisan Nasional and voted in their favor. Despite being strange bedfellows, the Pakatan Rakyat opposition coalition won massive gains in the recent elections, firmly entrenching a two-coalition system. It’s not all roses and sunshine though, these three parties have fundamentally different ideologies, and critics have likened their coalition to a marriage of political opportunism. PAS for example, ardently advocates the implementation of sharia law and hudud Islamic penal code, and from its inception has called for the foundation of an Islamic state. DAP staunchly opposes the implementation of hudud law and the concept of an Islamic state, while Anwar, always a man of many masks, plays the middle ground, saying that hudud is not the official policy of the coalition, but that

he personally supports it.

Aside from instilling the perception that Malaysia's electoral process is deeply unfair and rigged in favor of the ruling party, the opposition campaigned on a platform of fighting corruption and creating more equitable wealth distribution, which resonated deeply with the electorate. Pakatan retained their stronghold of Penang while making significant inroads in places like Sabah, Sarawak, and Johor, known to be "fixed deposits" of the ruling party. Even with significant victories achieved by the opposition, Anwar Ibrahim has held steadfast to his pre-election assertion that only "massive fraud" would prevent his coalition's victory. This statement is inherently problematic, because it presupposes that any election result that yields anything other than Anwar's victory is: invalid, illegitimate, and fraud. The opposition notably meted out a steady stream of allegations, which largely remain entirely unsubstantiated. Anwar accused Prime Minister Najib Razak's office of flying in some 40,000 foreign nationals to illegally to vote on behalf of the ruling coalition in key battleground states in Malaysia.

Such an allegation is not only logistically unsound, but bloggers soon pointed out several mathematic discrepancies in the details Anwar provided, and that the feat of transporting such a large volume of individuals could not possibly be accomplished with the alleged flights that took place. At the time of this article being written, he has produced no evidence to validate his accusation. Operators of the airlines Anwar claimed were involved dismissed his claims as baseless rumors. Third-party election monitors, such as the IDEAS Institute, claimed that although structural biases exist, such as in the uneven delineation of voting constituencies and the government's control of mainstream media, the election process "proceeded smoothly" and that "the vast majority of the glitches were not major" lending credibility away from claims of that "massive fraud" took place. The Merdeka Centre, a widely quoted polling agency, also accused the opposition of making a "host of unsubstantiated allegations about the elections". It shouldn't surprise anyone that Anwar, always a publicity-junkie, declared Pakatan's victory over Twitter before any official results were announced, creating mass confusion. If compelling evidence exists that proves Barisan Nasional stole the elections, the opposition hasn't made it available for public scrutiny.

'Democracy does not work'

Haris Ibrahim from the pro-opposition group ABU recently vowed to overthrow the ruling coalition by force, stating, "We will take to the streets and take over. If we really want to overthrow them, there is no other way. Democracy does not work." Members of the opposition coalition hold conflicting views regarding attempts to overthrow the government by force; some have condoned it while others have condemned it. Bersih, an electoral watchdog, has promised to mobilize protestors to descend on Malaysia's administrative capital, Putrajaya. The National Endowment for Democracy or NED, is a Washington-based foundation that supports democratic initiatives and US-friendly opposition groups abroad; it provides over \$1 million to various projects in Malaysia each year, and most of the players now calling for overthrowing the regime are the recipients. According to the NED's website, it conducts training, research, and leadership cultivation exercises with the governments of Penang and Selangor, key opposition-held states. Members of Barisan Nasional have denounced Ibrahim's connections to the NED in the Malaysian Parliament, and the lack of transparency surrounding the funding.

The electoral watchdog group Bersih has organized rallies calling for electoral reform, which many criticized as being as thinly veiled anti-government protests due to the participation of

key opposition figures. Tunku Abdul Aziz Ibrahim, a key player in the opposition prior to defecting from the DAP, claimed that Americans from US-based foundations were calling the shots and outlining the functions and operations of Bersih. "In the meeting, I was offered to head the watchdog because they said I have the credentials, integrity and credibility for the post. They told me that the movement was to ensure free and fair elections in the country," he said, disclosing that he was offered some \$4,000 monthly plus other perks and allowances for his position. Aziz also accused Malaysia's opposition leader of using Bersih to channel support to his political campaign, "Anwar makes good use of his international networking to get these funds. I don't know whether Bersih leaders knew it or not, but Bersih is Anwar's vehicle to receive international funds under the guise of democracy and free and fair elections. Bersih is not a non-partisan independent organisation. It's Anwar's baby." Aziz resisted overseas funding because he claims it compromises national integrity and dignity. "Local organisations should justify their existence to Malaysians, not to foreigners. Local organisations should not owe their existence and allegiance to foreigners," he stressed.

Upon closer examination of the language used by these foundations, when they claim to be working toward "broadening the appeal of political parties," a critical question comes to mind – when does so-called 'democracy-promotion' become political interference? The work of the NED has ostensibly blurred the line between the two, while masking their overt backing for actors they support in the benign language of electoral transparency, freedom and the promotion of human rights. The US has displayed an undeniable resurgence of interest in Southeast Asia as part of its Asia Pivot policy, ostensibly as a response to growing Chinese economic influence in the region. PM Najib Razak has attached primary importance to Malaysia's relationship with Beijing, Malaysia's largest trade partner. Washington's backing for Malaysia's US-friendly opposition must be seen in the context of its moves to bolster its military muscle and dominance over the Asia-Pacific region in line with its pivot. Malaysia is a key player in Southeast Asia, and Washington is doing what it can to tip the scale in favor of the opposition after its success in the 2008 elections and the 2013 elections. Despite the current administration's considerable efforts to deepen ties to the US, Anwar's history makes him more of an asset to US policy than the incumbent.

The ruling coalition is far from perfect, it has failed to stifle issues of high-level corruption and elite opulence remains a huge problem. However, Malaysia was transformed from an exporter of rubber and tin into a key industrial player with strong domestic industries under its watch; it has overseen stable economic growth, while promising 3.3 million new jobs in the high-income sector and attracting multi-million dollar investments.

The ruling government will likely be able to ride through the coming barrage of protestors out with the express purpose of toppling the government, but analysts say if trends continue, the opposition will likely overcome and take power in the 2018 by the ballot box. PM Najib is now in a delicate position, and he must make greater efforts to address the trust deficit that exists between the people and the Malaysian leadership, and focus on implementing reforms to the EC that are recommended by observer groups to ensure greater transparency. The most pressing and arduous task ahead of him will be reestablishing trust with an angry, highly polarized and wary electorate. Malaysia has never experienced a change in government, but if Anwar Ibrahim ever finds himself at the helm, the nation will walk on uncharted political territory that will bring far-reaching changes, not only in economic and diplomatic directions of the country, but also in the state's relationship with the moderate brand of Islam it was founded upon.

Nile Bowie is a blogger and independent Malaysia-based political analyst.

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