

# Malaysia's Democracy in the Shadow of Hegemonic Rule

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Malaysian politics have been in flux since the historic defeat of the long-dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 2018. That defeat ended 60 years of uninterrupted UMNO rule; it also fragmented Malaysia's party system and paved the way for outcomes that were previously almost unimaginable. Examples abound, from the current Unity Government that brings together former arch rivals,<sup>2</sup> to the breakthrough performance<sup>3</sup> of the Islamist Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and the decoupling of East Malaysian parties from their erstwhile peninsular overlords. In short, Malaysian politics are both more open and less predictable today than in decades before.

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who assumed power as head of the Unity Government following last November's general election, has an ambitious reform agenda. But he must govern in a complex political space that features many remnants from UMNO's long rule, some of which are inherently constraining.

Prior to 2018, Malaysia was often called a dominant party regime,<sup>4</sup> reflecting UMNO's tight grasp over politics. Regimes of this kind blend features of democracy and autocracy: elections are regularly held and contested by an opposition, but the dominant party reshapes institutions in ways that provide it with fundamental advantages and reinforce its rule. Malaysia's electoral system,<sup>5</sup> with its myriad features that advantaged UMNO, reflects this. Less tangibly, dominant parties *also* reshape the political narratives and norms that structure political competition, thereby influencing voter preferences and the electorate's expectations of the

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Hutchinson, "Forging Anwar's Cabinet: Fervent Followers, Forbidden Friends, and Former Foes". *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 18, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Serina Rahman, "Malaysia's 'Green Wave' Was a Long Time Coming". *ISEAS Fulcrum*, no. 22, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> William Case, "Late Malaysian Politics: From Single Party Dominance to Multi Party Mayhem". *RSIS Working Paper*, no. 335, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Kai Ostwald, "Malaysia's Electoral Process: The Methods and Costs of Perpetuating UMNO Rule". *ISEAS Trends*, no. 19, 2017.

government. These features constitute the broader political regime that exists separately from the party.<sup>6</sup>

Following its second successive defeat in 2022, UMNO has clearly lost its status as a dominant party.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, many elements of the regime it created — *in its image* — during its six decades in power remain intact. In short, the legacy of UMNO's hegemonic rule continues to influence politics in fundamental ways, even after the party's decline.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the ideological underpinning of Malaysian politics. To be clear, UMNO adopted an essentialised racial framework from the British and the "special position" of the Malays was already enshrined in the 1957 Constitution. But over its decades in power, UMNO used its control of Malaysia's strong state to ensure that ethnicity remained the defining feature of politics. That was politically expedient: as an ethnic Malay party founded to represent the interests of the Malay community, its relevance was conditional upon the Malay identity and the vulnerabilities associated with it remaining salient in public life, both of which formed UMNO's *raison d'être*. In sum, what began under colonial rule was sharpened during decades of political development under a hegemonic ethno-religious party that reshaped the parameters of political competition to align with its identity.

UMNO was highly successful in that endeavour. The narrative of simultaneous Malay primacy and vulnerability remains deeply entrenched among the Malay-majority electorate. For political elites, reflecting this ideology is a precondition for being viewed as legitimate by a sizeable portion of Malays. Other parties have responded accordingly: Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) is essentially an UMNO clone, while PAS diverges mainly by more strongly foregrounding the Muslim element of the Malay-Muslim identity.

The resilience of this ideological framework has key implications for day-to-day politics that impose divergent pressures on Anwar. As he is the face of the *reformasi* movement, many progressive Malaysians have placed their hopes for reform in his hands. Anwar understands the imperative of action; he recently declared that Malaysia will "go to the dogs"<sup>8</sup> if his government fails to bring about change. But he also faces real constraints. Actions that might be perceived as challenging Malay primacy carry high risk, as they can delegitimise his government in the eyes of many Malays and trigger politically destabilising resistance. The backlash against the

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<sup>6</sup> Ross Tapsell, "Malaysia in 2019: A Change in Government without Regime Change". *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Meredith Weiss and Ibrahim Suffian, "Decline and Fall of Malaysia's Dominant-Party System". *Pacific Affairs*, 96(2): 281-301.

<sup>8</sup> Isabella Leong, "Malaysia will 'go to the dogs' if govt fails to bring change – Anwar". *Malaysiakini*, published 8 June 2023.

proposed ratification of the International Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)<sup>9</sup> — which had few actual policy implications — illustrates this clearly.

Against the backdrop of two collapsed governments in recent years, Anwar understandably has little appetite to play with fire. His appointment of *bumiputera* to all symbolically important positions in the Unity Government reflects this caution. So too does his focus on issues that are peripheral to identity politics: anti-corruption and pro-growth reforms are broadly palatable, so long as they stay well clear of ethno-religious matters. But deeper reforms that might affect the real or perceived distribution of power across groups are too contentious to take on. Even in rhetoric, Anwar has been restrained in his response to ethno-religious attacks, lest he appear to defend an alternative ideology. Regardless of his underlying convictions, this approach reflects the constraints and political realities of post-hegemonic Malaysian politics.

Those realities have implications for the state of Malaysia's democracy. Academics have debated how each twist and turn of politics moves the proverbial needle along a spectrum bounded by autocracy on one end and democracy on the other. The underlying assumption is that further democratisation is not only possible but is a choice available to leaders. It is not obvious that either proposition is true. Coercion no longer plays a clear role in keeping the government in power, as it did in earlier eras. Political competition is now also relatively free and fair *within the ideological bounds* left by decades of hegemonic rule. Removing those bounds would open political competition further — and might make Malaysia more democratic — but it is doubtful any Malaysian leader has the agency to do that, even if he or she so desires. Ideologies are inherently malleable but having been embedded over decades, the relevant timeline for meaningful change is likely to be generational. If that is correct, then perhaps Malaysia already is as democratic as its legacy of hegemonic rule allows, at least for the foreseeable future. Pragmatic politics may be the most sensible response.

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<sup>9</sup> Prashant Waikar, "ICERD and Old Politics: New Twists in Post-Election Malaysia?". *RSIS Commentary*, no. 214, 2018.