

Political Coup from Pakatan Harapan to Perikatan Nasional: A Nightmare Tragedy During Pandemic Covid-19

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Abstract: The power transition from Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan - PH) to National Alliance (Perikatan Nasional - PN) is a nightmare and the defections of several MPs from PH to PN are worsening the Malaysian political scenario. The downfall of PH could be explained how Mahathir had manipulated the PH loyalty in making a decision without consulting its coalition members. The fall of PH is not a strange scenario, but Mahathir's role itself had played as a kingmaker in the collapse of his own administration. Besides that, PN has been portrayed by opponents as a 'backdoor power grab' and PN led by Muhyiddin has created simple narrative due to stay in power: political corruption is used as a bribe to silence coalition members from revolting and the Movement Control Orders (MCOs) due to Covid-19 pandemic and the announcement of emergency ordinance 2021 throughout Malaysia from 11 Jan 2021 to 1 August 2021 imposed by Muhyiddin has strengthened his position. Therefore, this research found that Muhyiddin could give thousands of reasons why he needs to implement an emergency order and many opposition MPs asserted that Muhyiddin's reasoning is just a political rhetoric to allow him to stay in power.

Keywords: transition, manipulated, coalition, pandemic, opposition

1. Introduction

It's been over a year since National Alliance (Perikatan Nasional - PN) came to power under Muhyiddin Yassin and many observers predicted that Muhyiddin will facing a lot of obstacle from opposition, peoples and his previous party members. Muhyiddin, from Malaysia United Indigenous Party (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia - Bersatu) came to power after several elite politicians from Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan - PH) had reconfigured their support to their own alliance and thus to remove the previous Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad from office and prevent his presumed successor, Anwar Ibrahim from assuming power. Muhyiddin was a senior veteran politician with United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) who served as Deputy Prime Minister under Najib. After giving

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the opposition openly to Najib's actions in the 1MDB scandal, he was expelled from the government in 2015 and ended his career as a politician under UMNO, joining Bersatu as party president. At the time of his defection from PH to PN in February 2020, he was serving as the Minister of Home Affairs under Mahathir.

By defection from the PH, Muhyiddin has done an undemocratic action by breaking out the Bersatu party. This immoral had eliminated Mahathir's working majority in parliament and collapsed the PH government. On 29 February, Muhyiddin secured the support of Malaysia's King to form a new PN government, and he took the oath of office as Prime Minister the next day. His elevation has been portrayed by opponents as a 'backdoor power grab'. Politics aside, Muhyiddin clearly lacks a popular mandate, having overturned a government without facing the voters and having restored UMNO to power, contrary to the result of the 2018 elections. Muhyiddin's cabinet is at risk and holds a very slim and yet untested majority - probably 113 seats out of 222. The parliamentary session has been delayed until mid-May 2020 amid fears that he was not able to prevent the vote of no confidence against him. Indeed, several parties under the PN umbrella have a poor record of cooperation, particularly Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which has left every coalition it has joined, and UMNO, which cannot dominate the new government, as it has traditionally.

The transition power from PH to PN could be classified as a coup due to the defection of many politicians from PH and joined to support Muhyiddin-led government. The PH or PN was formed by the coalition of several political parties and the fall and resurgence of a government is a common scenario. The stability of a coalition government is extremely fragile, and the affiliate members of a political party can move out and form a new party or join any other political parties. Therefore, to ensure the coalition government is strong and stable, the political corruption such as a cabinet minister's post or the CEO of GLC will be created and distribute to the members of coalition government. This is the strategy to ensure the survival of the coalition government to prolong the government to lead the country without interference from its alliance. Underlying political corruption was the sober calculation that the politician would lose its appeal when one men's bellies are full.

PN realized that to stay in power for a long period, they must create a strategy such as buying politicians from the opposition. Politics needs power and the political power could be generated through political corruption. For instance, Japanese Prime Minister, Kakuei Tanaka had created a veritable assembly line of power and money. The more money he had, the more people he could lure to his faction. The more people in his faction, the more power he has to shape the government's decisions. The more he could influence the government's decisions, the more money he could raise - because in a strong system, business are regularly affected by government actions, and the willingness to pay a high price to anybody who could swing a permit, a public works contract or regulation the right way [1]. In other words, money could dilute the dignity of a politician and can develop a new collaboration within politicians, supporters, followers and people.

Therefore, the objective of this article is to analyze what are the main factors that results in the fall of PH and how PN stabilized its power. Political, racial and religious fault lines have had a particularly destabilising effect on the country's governing coalitions since 2018, Given the fractiousness of Malaysia's political class and public distrust over the failure of several prime ministers to implement good-governance reforms, Muhyiddin will probably struggle to maintain control over the government and may respond by using authoritarian measures to hold on to power. Muhyiddin realized that he has become a Prime Minister without facing the voters and what he has done is an immoral act by betraying his alliance merely for the sake of power. Thus, Muhyiddin and his factions must prevent the opposition

influence by using as many types of rule in order to ensure that his government will survive for a long period.

2. The fall of PH

Twenty-two months after PH have toppled the National Front (Barisan Nasional - BN) coalition in May 2018, Malaysia's democratic transition has been reversed and replaced with endless machinations both between and within the government and opposition camps. PH government collapsed on 24 February 2020 when Mahathir in a conscious condition has announced his resignation as Prime Minister, expecting to return to the Prime Minister's Office with fewer constraints from allies. However, Mahathir's second person who is influential in Bersatu, Muhyiddin Yassin, ousted him and was appointed by the King as the eighth Prime Minister on 1st March. The change of government could be attributed as a political drama because Mahathir and his factions have well planned the power transition from PH to PN. As a veteran and experienced politician, Mahathir is seen as a politician who acted alone by manipulating the PH loyalty in deciding a decision without consulting its allies. The fall of PH is not a strange scenario, but Mahathir's role itself has contributed in the collapse of his own administration.

First, Mahathir used his power to accept recycling politicians or in others word thrash politicians as his allies which had been given a burden to PH. Several politicians from UMNO had jumped to Bersatu just after the 14th General Election (GE 14) result was announced although they had won the seat on UMNO's ticket. Mahathir implies that by accepting politicians from UMNO will strengthen its position as leader of the Malay-centric government. Mahathir, who is also the Bersatu chairman, said the party has done its due diligence and has accepted them. However, Mahathir asserted that their membership does not grant them any form of protection from the past misdeeds [2]. The Malaysian public was fascinated that they had elected such a capable candidate and rejected BN at the ballot box. That is what exit polls showed the Malaysian people voted for, and it is what they will receive. Unfortunately, Mahathir has destroyed the dreams of Malaysian by inviting thrash politicians from UMNO to become a part of PH government.

Many of the jumping politician used to be a minister under BN and Mahathir knew about this phenomenon. While serving as ministers, their performance were poor and due to the worth reputation, the voters had punished them by not electing them as a ruling party. To put in bluntly, PH does not need these frog politicians, especially from UMNO because most of them had manipulate the government's budgets to enrich their bellies and line their own pockets without thinking of the people. Besides that, many of them were involved in huge scale corruption and voters believed that they had done their responsibility by moving out this frog politician by not electing them as a ruling party through the ballot box. Unfortunately, Mahathir has used his veto power by welcome this frog politicians without doing discussing with his allies. Frog politicians always have a good reason to leave their party by using the narrative phrase of lost confidence to his own party. Therefore, Mahathir himself has played a key role in his destruction and destroyed Malaysia's hope of becoming a respected country in foreign countries perspective.

Second, Mahathir seems to behave like a single party leader and always neglected the function of the PH's presidential council and his cabinet. Each head of a political party will automatically be a member of the presidential council and their role is to discuss various issues related to the country. However, Mahathir had used his prerogative power by appointing Latheefa Koya as a Chief Commissioner of Malaysia Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) without discussing the matter with

the cabinet or presidential council. The appointment of the first female head at Malaysia's federal anti-corruption body has drawn flak from both sides of the country's political division following accusations that Mahathir went against his coalition's manifesto by making the decision alone [3]. Mahathir deliberately went against the PH's manifesto in order to create an internal conflict among PH allies. Mahathir forgot that his election manifesto promised that the appointments for high-ranking civil service positions will have to go through a parliamentary select committee. Unfortunately, Mahathir made the decision without doing discussing with the PH allies and this is one of the factors why PH couldn't stay in power for a long period.

Third, Mahathir stepped down as a Prime Minister without notifying the PH members. Every member in the PH coalition have the right to know why Mahathir wanted to step down as a Prime Minister. If Mahathir felt that he is unable to bear responsibility as a Prime Minister, it's better for him to hand over the Prime Minister seat to his successor, Anwar Ibrahim. Mahathir realized that he had two years agreement to be the Prime Minister and after that, he had to hand it over to Anwar. However, it's likely that Mahathir, who was also been a Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003, doesn't intend give up his leadership at all [4]. For instance, Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe has announced to the public regarding his resignation in August 2020 without hiding it. He said he did not want his illness to get in the way of decision making and apologized to the Japanese people for failing to complete his term in office. Mahathir should imitate Shinzo Abe's style without having to flip-flop by delivering various absurd excuses. Unfortunately, Mahathir likes to see his coalition members waiting for an answer on his resignation as Prime Minister.

Finally, although there was a two years agreement between Mahathir and the PH coalition regarding the period of Prime Minister, Mahathir had no intention of handling the power over to Anwar. Mahathir refused to commit to a clear timeline on when he will hand over the power. This raised the concerns about the stability of the Malaysian government, especially since the popularity of the ruling coalition has plunged [5]. Mahathir kept giving a ridiculous reason by saying that he would not hand over before a summit of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries that Malaysia who to host in November but could be ready after that. While the coalition has insisted that there exists a "signed agreement" guaranteeing Anwar Ibrahim's succession, observers have expressed doubts about the elder statesman's willingness to cede power to his once estranged protégé. Mahathir has mocked PH's patience and loyalty by disregarding the mutual agreement.

Of course, other than Mahathir, there are a lot of reasons for the fall of PH such as internal conflict among PH members, Malay polity issue and the slogan "Islam is threatened under PH" played by PAS. However, many politicians from PH members argued that Mahathir is the major cause of the downfall PH. As Chin (2020, p 293) mentioned that Mahathir himself played a key role in the destruction of his own administration [6]. This is related to his actions on the succession issue and his attempts to create a new Malay-centric coalition in early 2019 which led to the political crisis and the downfall of the PH administration. Furthermore, Wong (2020, p 597) argued that the Sheraton's Move may be seen as not just a party coup by Muhyiddin and Azmin, but also a self-coup by Mahathir to expand his power [7]. Mahathir is a brilliant politician who could arrange a smart strategy to make his allies from PKR, DAP and Amanah to be influenced. As a conclusion, the downfall of PH is not because the PH members are not qualified to become a government, but Mahathir is the key role in the destruction of PH.

3. PH to PN power exchange

The Machiavelli philosophy has become famous among the politician from the third world country and each of them focus on power as a main target. When Mahathir announced his resignation as a Prime Minister, Muhyiddin realized that there was a golden opportunity for him to become a Prime Minister. Muhyiddin, who also is a senior politician knows well about Malaysia's politic and the weakness of Malaysia's political system. Muhyiddin has set up a well-planned strategy to take over the government from PH. In mid-February 2020, after months of internal negotiations, a new party coalition called PN, formed to oppose Mahathir's government. The coalition comprised of UMNO, PAS, disgruntled members of Mahathir's and Anwar's parties, and a few members of regional parties from the states of Sarawak and Sabah, which are located on the island of Borneo (sometimes referred to as East Malaysia). The King has chosen Muhyiddin as a Prime Minister, one of the most prominent defectors from PH to PN. To put in bluntly, Muhyiddin doesn't mind being called a frog politician as long as the power is in his hands.

The choice of Muhyiddin also sparked the ire of many Malaysians who took to social media and to the street to register their opposition to the new "backdoor government." They claim they had not voted for Muhyiddin - Bersatu was a junior partner in the PH coalition - and condemned him for allying with UMNO, long known for corruption and an authoritarian brand of politics [8]. Muhyiddin realized that many of his coalition members were not clean from corruption scandal, but this did not stop Muhyiddin from being formally sworn in as Prime Minister on March 1. With the 2018 election results essentially nullified and UMNO at least temporarily back in power, Malaysia is at a critical juncture: It could return down the path of autocracy, or the forces that swept UMNO out of power in 2018 could prevail once again. At stake, Malaysia's battle to clean up its politics and defy the broad currents of democratic regression in Southeast Asia. Therefore, Muhyiddin must devise various strategies to ensure his government will survive and the strategy to stay in power will be discussed in this section.

First, political corruption is used as a bribe to silence coalition members from revolting. Wong (2020, p 597) argued that given his fragile power base in the medley of Bersatu, UMNO, PAS, GPS and minor parties, Muhyiddin expanded the payroll vote, from Mahathir's 50 parliamentarians and five Senators to 63 parliamentarians and seven Senators. Ironically, Muhyiddin did not preserve the post of Deputy Prime Minister in his cabinet as normally done by the previous government [7]. Muhyiddin has to double size his cabinet members compared to PH's cabinet to ensure that all of his coalition members will keep supporting him without any doubt. As a comparison, in 2020, China with a population of 1.44 billion has only 33 cabinet ministers while Malaysia which has only 32 million inhabitants has 71 cabinet ministers. In addition, Muhyiddin has opted to ally and appointing members of PAS to his cabinet - giving them the law, environment and domestic commodities portfolios - and appointing a mufti as Minister for Religion. Furthermore, all MPs who do not presently hold positions in government will be made heads of GLCs by the PN-led government, according to PAS Secretary-General Takiyuddin Hassan, who is also the de facto Law Minister [9].

Second, the Movement Control Orders (MCOs) due to Covid-19 pandemic and the announced of emergency ordinance 2021 throughout Malaysia from 11 Jan 2021 to 1 August 2021 imposed by Muhyiddin have strengthened his position. Although Muhyiddin has defended this proclamation of emergency (assented by the King by his request nonetheless) as an attempt to combat Covid-19, many have viewed it as unconstitutional and cannot connect the dots between a public health and safety crisis and allocating powers to the executive. Nevertheless, one thing is for sure: the emergency ordinance is an unprecedented measure to combat the pandemic. Besides that, Muhyiddin used the outbreak as an excuse to adjourn parliament even though it was technologically feasible to have a virtual or hybrid

sitting. For now, that is an unlikely prospect, as the new parliament's opening date has been postponed, possibly allowing Muhyiddin more time to peel lawmakers away from PH. Any fracturing might allow him to form a slender but longer-lasting governing coalition comprised of UMNO, PAS and a few more defecting Malay legislators from PH.

The impact of the emergency ordinance could undermine investor's confidence and government's intervention unchecked by parliament could jeopardize market stability. The move could send negative signals to investors, leading to the outflow or diversion of foreign investment. The question is, with the emergency being in effect until Aug 1, how will this impact the current, planned and future investments? Many of the giant company such as Hyundai Motor Corporation (not related to Hyundai Sime Darby Motors), Sony's plant in Penang, IBM Cyberjaya and Citibank have move out their business from Malaysia due to uncertainties with the Malaysia's political turmoil. Of course, investors will continue to maintain their business in a country if the government of the country could guarantee security from the political perspective. Indonesia, Malaysia neighbour is receiving a huge foreign direct investments (FDI) to the tune of hundreds of billions while Malaysia is still busy selling off national's assets, and the impact is Malaysians will be losing their jobs.

Third, Muhyiddin and his allies had allocated a huge budget for cybertrooper in order to stay in power. Muhyiddin believed that his government needed various agencies to disseminate information and counter lies made against it. Previously, BN-UMNO had created a small unit as known as Special Affairs Department (JASA) under the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia, but this unit was dissolved under PH in 2018. The role of this unit is for its cybertroopers - social media commentators similar to "trolls" - who drive heated nationalistic and race-related agendas, and target government critics. In the national budget 2021, Muhyiddin through his Ministry of Finance had asked the government to provide RM81.5 million to the JASA. However, Dewan Rakyat had approved a proposal to reduce the allocation for the expansion of JASA amounting to RM45 million from RM81.5 million as allocated in the 2021 budget. When a government agency starts indulging in politics, people can see through it, and when that happens whatever information they gather from the ground may be inaccurate. JASA should function as part of the civil service, not led by politicians. It will be relevant only if they can supplement the government's communications efforts minus politics and this issue has become the focus of discussion on social media.

Muhyiddin has gained some credit with the emergency ordinance which have successfully flattened the Covid-19 case curve, and he succeeded to disable the public's political protests by the coronavirus outbreak and the lockdown. Muhyiddin realized that he came into power through the backdoor, they alleged that he had misled the King that he had the numbers when he did not. However, Muhyiddin has come out with a well plan to dysfunction the parliament by declaring emergency ordinance and he successfully obtained the approval from the King. For instance, PAS has never been a minister at the federal level and when Muhyiddin offered them the post of cabinet minister, of course PAS will undoubtedly accept it because of the salary, and it is prestigious. The reality is the emergency ordinance has restrained the movement of the opposition to criticize and debate an issue and this advantage has been used by Muhyiddin to strengthen his power as Prime Minister.

3.1 Multiracial coalition vs Malay-centric coalition

In the GE 14, Malaysian's voters gave a shock to UMNO-BN when they have swung their vote and support PH to form a government. Malaysian's voters believed that it's time to give an opportunity to PH to govern Malaysia due to the damage that UMNO-BN has done. The PH government consisted multiracial coalition and DAP had been assigned the responsibility to manage the finance of the country.

This phenomenon has risen the dissatisfaction among the Malay hardliners, and they claimed that the PH is controlled by the Chinese. Chin (2020, p 289) argued that non-Malays can live in harmony in Malaysia, but they cannot have equal political rights and can never hold the top positions in government and key institutions [6]. The Malay hardliners asserted that the top post in the government were reserved for Malays and other races are not eligible. The narrative in simple terms is this: Malay believed that the land of the Malays belonged to them and as an indigenous people of Malaysia, they must dominate the prestigious post in the government.

UMNO has been the ruling party for six decades and they feel awkward when its status as a government has turned into opposition. Therefore, UMNO must find a new coalition partner due to his party survival and they realized that PAS was suitable as a new coalition member based on the Malay and Islam factor. Hence, in September 2019, UMNO signed a political pact with PAS and the pact was known as Muafakat Nasional (national consensus - MN). MN was designed to bring these two long-standing antagonists into a single, unbeatable, political force in the Malay community. Not only UMNO has a bad history in the GE 14, but PAS also suffered the same fate as UMNO. PAS had intended to become a kingmaker in GE 14, but they had failed to fulfill their mission. Therefore, in order to defeat PH, UMNO and PAS had signed a political cooperation although their original ideologies are differed but have the same mission.

In Malaysia's political history, PH have been elected as the ruling party for the first time and they are determined to deliver a good service to Malaysians and to preserve their reputation as a multiracial coalition. However, MN dominated by Malay politicians realized that due to their survival politics, they must restrict the PH from continuing to provide services to the people. Therefore, MN created sensitive issues through their cybertrooper such as racism and the rights of the Malays in order to tease people to hate PH. Besides that, when Mahathir opened the door to ex-UMNO MPs to joint Bersatu, this indirectly give a momentum to MN to work together with Mahathir to toppled PH. They trusted Mahathir because he was the man who vigorously implemented the racial discriminatory New Economic Policy (NEP) when he was the Prime Minister from 1981-2003. Mahathir had a reputation of being a champion of Malay rights cemented by his well-known book, *The Malay Dilemma* [6].

When Mahathir suddenly made an announcement to resign as a Prime Minister, Muhyiddin realize that this is a golden opportunity for him to form a government together with UMNO-PAS and declared that their party is Malay-centric coalition. In politics, there are no moral values in their minds and Muhyiddin shamelessly was willing to betray his coalition partner merely because wanted to become a Prime Minister and he was labelled as prominent defectors in the new modern political era. To form a new government that is 95% dominated with Malays, Muhyiddin was willing to cooperate with all political parties except DAP. There was wider narrative from the Malay hardliners that PH government was monopolised by non-Malays. They claimed that more than half of the MPs in the PH coalition were non-Malays and 11 of the 28 ministers in the PH federal cabinet were conquered by non-Malays. For comparison, the new PN cabinet that established after the fall of the PH, where only 5 out of 31 ministers are non-Malays [10].

PH had become a ruling party through GE while PN through political coup and there is the different between multiracial PH and Malay-centric PN. PH believed that once the people have given them a mandate, they must provide the best service to them. For instance, PH through The Prime Minister Office (PMO) had announced that the government will implement the 18 per cent reduction in toll rates for passenger vehicles at all highways owned by PLUS as early as 1 Feb 2020. This news makes almost all Malaysians happy because during the BN rule, toll rates have never reduced. The highways involved are the North-South Expressway (NSE) including New Klang Valley Expressway (NKVE), North-

South Expressway Central Link (NSECL) or the ELITE Highway, Malaysia-Singapore Second Link (LINKEDUA), East Coast Highway 2 (LPT2), Seremban-Port Dickson Highway (SPDH), Butterworth-Kulim Expressway (BKE) and Penang Bridge (JPP)” [11]. In addition, PH pledged to fight corruption and enact policies labelled ‘populist’ by its opponents, including cutting taxes and increasing spending on health and education, while including younger and more ethnically diverse leaders in the political process.

However, PN became a champion in nurturing political corruption and was willing to spend large sums of state money by buying politicians from the opposition just to thwart PH's efforts to become the government again. Furthermore, PN has abused the power by declaring emergency ordinance and they intend to shut down the function of the parliament and block opposition politicians from debating any issues regarding the country. PN has absolute power through emergency ordinance and opposition urge Muhyiddin reconvenes parliament and allow the Parliamentary Select Committee to function so that the government can be transparent with their plans to tap into the National Trust Fund (NTF) reportedly for the procurement of vaccines and related expenditures. This is in view with the PN's use of their emergency powers to pass a law under the Emergency (National Trust Fund) (Amendment) Ordinance 2021 today which allows the current government to use such trust funds which is generally reserved for our future generations without much scrutiny and oversight [12].

4. Conclusion

After winning the GE 14 on that historic day May 9, 2018 to great fanfare, it crashed on Feb 24, 2020 following the sudden resignation of Mahathir and the departure of Bersatu from the PH coalition. Looking back on the less than two years PH served as the federal government, there were many successes, as well as evident weaknesses in the way the coalition governed the country. PH, which made history by defeating the BN government in the GE 14, faced a lot of criticisms in the months that followed the elections. Much of this criticism, in the early days, was in relation to its ambitious election manifesto, which featured many tall promises that would end up unfulfilled due to the government's financial constraints. During the 19 months it was in power, PH was criticized for many things, including poor communication, U-turns in policies, a failure to institute structural reforms in crucial areas such as education, and in-fighting. To be fair, the expectations of the peoples for the new government, and of a “New Malaysia”, were sky-high after the last general election, and this put the government's every move under scrutiny. This naturally led to disappointment among some voters when changes did not take place as fast as they expected.

The main cause of the PH downfall was Mahathir although there are some weaknesses of PH itself in governing the country. Mahathir has turned off the function of the presidential council and he makes many decisions individually. The vacant post of Prime Minister has given an opportunity to Muhyiddin to form a new government although he realized that he had overturned the government without facing the voters and has made a huge mistake when he restored UMNO to power. Besides that, Muhyiddin had declared the state of emergency effective 11 Jan to 1 August and he argued that the emergency was not to enable him to hold on to the post of Prime Minister but to ensure that the Covid-19 pandemic could be managed effectively and speedily. He gave an assurance that the emergency would be lifted earlier than its scheduled end of Aug 1 if the pandemic could be contained and the country was deemed safe from the virus. Muhyiddin could give thousands of reasons why he needs to implement an emergency order and many opposition MPs asserted that Muhyiddin's reasoning is just political rhetoric to allow him to stay in power.

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