

Domestic politics or international relations: Malaysia's 15th general election

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The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 sent a wave of triumph across the western world, as it signalled the end of the ideological conflict between the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union. It was assumed that the ideals of a western style capitalist, and democratic system have won. Since 1991, the concept of democracy itself has undergone several changes. Democracy continues to evolve as it continues facing challenges ranging from corruption to defection to foreign interference in elections, to influence operations to bureaucratic paralysis. The case of Malaysia's 15th general election (GE) becomes an interesting case in this context.

On November 19 this year, Malaysia is set for its 15th GE. In four years since 2018, Malaysia has seen three different administrations and three prime ministers (PMs), which is a record in Malaysia's political history since 1957. Since 2018, the country has been plagued by protracted instability, which saw the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition government collapse in 2020, while the defeated United Malays National Organization (UMNO) vaulted back to power with an unsteady coalition government. The PH government lost its majority in the parliament in 2020 when 11 members of parliament withdrew from the coalition. The PH government had replaced the UMNO in 2018. Malaysia's 14th GE in 2018 had ended the then world's longest one-party rule with regular elections. After ruling for 61 years, the UMNO finally fell at the ballot box in 2018. Public anger over the multibillion-dollar corruption scandal, the Malaysian Development Berhad Scandal, referred to as the 1MDB scandal was the reason for UMNO's fall.

The 1MDB scandal was a corruption, bribery and money laundering conspiracy in which the Malaysian sovereign wealth fund 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) was thoroughly embezzled, with assets diverted globally. The scandal had international contours as it implicated actors worldwide and led to criminal investigations in several countries. In fact, the 1MDB scandal is one of the world's greatest financial scandals and the United States department of justice had even labelled it as the largest kleptocracy case, back in 2016.

In 2019, power echelons in Malaysia shook again as evidence surfaced regarding China's efforts to strike a deal with the former Malaysian government in 2016 to bail out the 1MDB state fund, allegedly implicating former Premier Najib Rajak in exchange for deals tied to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the same year, Malaysia also banned the controversial book *Belt and Road Initiative for Win-Winism*, which, as stated by the home ministry, promotes communism and socialism and the contents could lead to confusion in the country. Controversial parts of the book include descriptions of Malays sympathising with Uyghur Muslims in China. About 60% of the population in Malaysia is ethnic Malay Muslim and there are sizeable minorities of people of Chinese and Indian origin, as well as indigenous communities. Clearly, domestic politics in Malaysia are deeply intertwined with international politics.

The PH, which took over the reins of power, in 2018 was headed by Mahathir Muhammad and Anwar Ibrahim, who both are former leaders of the UNMO. In 2019, then PM Mahathir Muhammad had stated while China is a friend, it is not for Malaysia to promote Beijing's ideology to Malaysian children. Beyond the intricate relationship between corruption, domestic politics and international relations, it also becomes pertinent to note the political fissures in Malaysia to understand how important the 15th GE is.

Fragmentation in Malaysia's democratic system has become constant and is visible from not just the frequent changes in the government, but also the very loosely formed coalitions and regular defections. Five Malaysian states have gone through administration changes caused by defections since 2020. The 15th GE remains an important event to watch out for due to a number of reasons. For one, the 15th GE is going to see the unprecedented involvement of first-time voters after the Malaysian parliament voted to reduce the voting age from 21 to 18 years and enabled automatic voter registration. Because of the change in the voting age, an unknown variable in the form of 1.4 million first time voters gets added to the complexity of Malaysian politics as it is not known how many of this group will vote or who they will vote for. All 222 parliamentary seats in the country will be available during the 15th GE, along with the state legislative seats of Pahang, Perlis and Perak. The state seat in Sabah- Bugaya will also have a mid-term election on the same day.

The polls are being held close to the annual monsoon season which generally begins in mid-November and brings in massive rain and flooding. This raises the concern over how many people will actually come out and vote. Parts of Malaysia have already been affected by flooding this year. Beyond the timing of the GE and the changed voting age, the profiles of the contesting leaders also remain interesting. Voters will have to choose

largely between three broad coalitions -- Barisan Nasional (BN), which is dominated by the UNMO but includes parties for ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians, the multiracial PH under former deputy PM Anwar Ibrahim and the Perikatan Nasional (PN) which includes Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), *Malaysia's Islamic Party*. *The states of Sabah and Sarawak have their own parties as well, like Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), which had previously backed the BN.*

Anwar Ibrahim has been named the PH coalition's prime ministerial candidate. In 2018, Mahathir Muhammad was to hand over power to Anwar, after the two joined together in the PH coalition and won the elections. However, repeated delays in the handing over of power led to divisions within the ruling bloc eventually leading to its downfall in 2020. Anwar also was seen as Mahathir's successor in the 1990s before he was fired in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, after which he spent six years in prison on charges of abuse of power and sodomy. He was released from prison in 2018 after Malaysia's king, Sultan Muhammad V granted him a pardon post PH's electoral victory.

Two-time former PM Mahathir Muhammad also submitted his nomination papers at his constituency; 97-year-old Mahathir had stated in October that he would defend his seat in the GE, but had not confirmed whether he would be the Prime Minister the third time if his political alliance wins. Mahathir warned that a win by UMNO could see imprisoned ex-PM Najib Razak pardoned and let off the hook. UMNO's president is Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who has been on trial over corruption related to a family charitable foundation. Najib currently remains jailed for convictions in a series of cases on 1MDB. PM Ismail Sabri Yaakob, registered to defend his seat in central Pahang state. PM Yakoob dissolved the parliament on October 10, nine months ahead of schedule at the behest of UMNO leaders, who encouraged by several state victories believe that the party has an upper hand over fragmented opposition. UMNO was an important part of the coalition that helmed the BN party in power till before it was dissolved.

Another interesting facet about the 15th GE is the cost of holding the elections, which as stated by the election commission of the country, will be double that of the last general election. Commission chairman Abdul Ghani Salleh stated that the 2018 polls cost RM500 million, while this election needs an allocation of RM1.01 billion, which is about \$ 302 million.

Adding to the conundrum caused by defections, dissolutions, and corruption in Malaysia is the issue of external influence. US-based watchdog, Freedom House, in its *Beijing Global Media Influence 2022 report* stated that the Malaysian government, journalists and civil societies should watch out for a shift to Beijing friendly coverage from UMNO aligned news outlets. The report adds that UMNO and by extension the BN have been pro-China since the emergence of the 1MDB scandal in 2015.

Malaysians have been tired of corruption, scandals, slowing rates of economic growth, inflation the declining value of the ringgit and political instability. Whether the 15th GE brings respite to the ordinary Malaysian is still unclear. The political jostling and posturing, while significant for domestic politics also has ramifications for international

relations, as the globe continues to witness a Cold War 2.0 between China and the western world led by the US. Irrespective of how the 15th GE pans out, it remains an important event to watch out for, as we see a closer enmeshing of domestic and international politics, with the concept of democracy continuing to evolve further.

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