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## Malaysians Braced for Election and its Aftermath

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**Beleaguered Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak is expected to prevail at the polls. What happens next is anyone's guess.**

Malaysians are widely expected to elect Prime Minister Najib Razak to another term in office when they go to the polls on Sunday, but any victory will fall far short of a ringing endorsement and could herald trouble ahead.

Najib's United Malays National Organization (UMNO) – the pro-Malay lead political party in the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition – has never been as unpopular as it is going into this election, according to analysts, who have pointed out that an absence of independent and reliable opinion polls makes forecasting difficult.

But a series of scandals following the 2008 election, UMNO's worst since Malaysia was granted independence by the colonial British more than 55 years ago, coupled with massive street protests demanding electoral reform has some observers even suggesting that a first-ever UMNO loss is possible.

That's unlikely.

Despite his short comings, Najib – who ousted his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in a party room coup in 2009 – enjoys a high personal approval rating largely thanks to Malaysia's racial divides. That popularity is probably strong enough to offset widespread loathing for UMNO and BN.

"You will note that the election is about Najib's leadership," Din Merican, an independent analyst who has worked for most major political parties, told *The Diplomat*. "It is like the presidential elections in the US. Barisan Nasional is less popular than Najib, who is seen as hardworking and efficient with lots of ideas."

However, Merican added that Najib and UMNO will not win back the cherished two-thirds majority in parliament, which allows the leadership to rewrite the constitution and pass laws without obstruction. The parliamentary majority was lost by Badawi five years ago.

Nonetheless, UMNO is expected to pick up votes due to political brawling over Islamic laws between Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). And come election day, UMNO's influence over the government-friendly press, its financial backing and dirty tricks department are expected to just get it over the line.

"I expect Najib to pull through because of massive cheating, gerrymandering," Merican added. If this prediction proves correct, Najib will have to overcome a litany of accusations.

For a start, there have been widespread allegations that illicit Malaysian citizenships have been granted to Muslim refugees who fled to the traditionally Christian state of Sabah on Borneo from the fighting in the southern Philippines, on the condition that they vote for UMNO and its political allies. Such religious politics are nothing new in Malaysia, where native Muslim Malays from East Malaysia – commonly known as *Bumiputeras* – enjoy the lion's share of the country's wealth and political clout.

Another major headache for Najib is a French investigation into allegations of kickbacks from the sale of two submarines to Malaysia and the death of Mongolian model Altantuya Shaariibuu, who worked as a translator on the sale. Two Police officers, Azilah Hadri and Sirul Azhar Umar, were found guilty and sentenced to hang for her murder, but doubts persist.

Meanwhile, there have been massive claims of fraud and corruption in Sarawak, with Swiss authorities investigating the long serving Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, whose family has amassed a fortune worth billions of dollars. A video secretly shot by Global Witness shows members of Mahmud's family detailing the true costs of doing business in the state.

Mahmud's brother Onn Mahmud has also been accused of using an elaborate global financial network to export his earnings from a portfolio of Sydney commercial and residential properties worth an estimated \$100 million, without paying tens of millions of dollars in taxes to the Australian government.

But perhaps his most volatile problems remain in Sabah, where state and federal authorities have failed to grasp the significance of an insurgency launched from Manila and the southern Philippines in March that left more than 70 people dead.

The litany of allegations should have opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and his Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) primed for victory, but corrupt politics have a long history in Malaysia and analysts are still tipping UMNO.

"I think the BN coalition will prevail rather than win," Gavin Greenwood, a regional security analyst with Hong Kong-based Allan & Associates, told *The Diplomat*. "Winning implies popular endorsement, which I do not see UMNO, or what's left of the coalition parties, achieving. However, they are likely to form the next government, and then have to somehow control a sullen and potentially unruly electorate and nation."

He said that the elections would show that while ethnicity, faith and the urban-rural divide remained powerful constraints in Malaysia, such divisions are eroding – especially among the young and educated.

"What is of great concern is whether the largely Malay elite are capable of embracing this and the threat non-denominational politics presents to their status and material interests," Greenwood said. "There is no evidence that as a group they are, which increases the likelihood of confrontation either before the polls or in the immediate aftermath."

In the last election, the UMNO-led BN won 140 of the 222 parliamentary seats, with opposition parties picking up an unprecedented 82 seats. The opposition also secured five of the 12 state legislatures that were contested. BN dropped 58 seats and took just 50.27 percent of the overall vote.

It was the first time since 1969 that the two-thirds super majority was lost and Merican said more seats could go in West Malaysia this Sunday. "Some states like Negeri Sembilan and Perak will be lost to Anwar's coalition but that does not threaten BN's control of Putrajaya," he said.

Greenwood added that there is also the possibility that any loss of nerve by UMNO's leadership in the immediate run up to the polls – either in response to a political stunt by Anwar or in response to their own perceptions about how the vote will go – will be reflected on the streets. The prospect of further protests as witnessed in the Bersih rallies is also strong.

"Many Malaysians recognize this option and are no doubt bracing themselves for such an outcome," Greenwood said. "The unprecedented murder of a senior customs official in Putrajaya on April 26, while seemingly unconnected to the elections – though in the present febrile atmosphere some have made that link – will serve as an omen that violence is rarely far below the surface when the entrenched elite feel threatened."

Whatever the outcome, it is expected to be a tight race with neither side expecting a resounding mandate. Assuming Najib wins, his position could still be in jeopardy. After all, it was Badawi's loss of the two-thirds majority that prompted Najib to challenge for his job.

Waiting in the wings is Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who could follow precedent and become Malaysia's next leader after Sunday's vote. This remains a possibility, even if Najib continues UMNO and BN's unbeaten record at the ballot box.

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