

MAHATHIR'S RETURN: THE ENDURANCE OF PRIME MINISTER DOMINATION IN MALAYSIA

Tunku Nashril-Abaidah^{1*} & Mohammad Agus Yusoff^{2**}

*First author, **Corresponding author

Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi
MARA

Centre for Research in History, Politics, and International Affairs
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
(tunkunashril@uitm.edu.my, agus@ukm.edu.my)

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The momentous win of Pakatan Harapan (PH) in Malaysia's 14th general election in May 2018 and the return of Mahathir to power for the second time caused many to believe that the call for institutional reform, especially in limiting the power of the prime minister, would finally come true. However, the domination of the prime minister continued despite the commitment made to limit that power, thus raising concern over the growing power held by the prime minister. This article argues that after almost two years in power, prime minister domination under Mahathir grew despite the reforms which have been manifested, thus indicating the endurance of prime minister domination. The plausible explanation for this is the asymmetrical power embedded in the political system which allows the prime minister to dominate the political process and accumulate power in his hands.

Keywords: asymmetrical power, prime minister domination, Malaysian politics, Mahathir, power consolidation

Introduction

The return of Mahathir to Malaysian politics offers an opportunity for political analysts to explore the dynamics of Mahathir's premierships. He was the longest-serving prime minister Malaysia ever had and during his tenure, he was regarded as an autocratic leader as many of his actions was deemed to undermine democratic practices (Respini & Sahrasad, 2016). As the country's prime minister for 22 years, he was seen as the only person who could bring together an opposition coalition to contest against the Barisan Nasional (BN) in the 2018 general election and to secure the Malay votes, especially in rural areas. Under the pretext of saving Malaysia from kleptocracy, Mahathir teamed up with his former nemesis Anwar Ibrahim, something which many would never have imagined. The

reconciliation between these two pertinent political figures paved the way for the creation of a new grand opposition coalition, known as Pakatan Harapan (PH). This coalition agreed to nominate Mahathir as the candidate for prime ministership as he was seen as the best choice to defeat the BN regime (Hutchinson, 2018). Mahathir influence, especially among the Malay voters and the absence of leaders in PH who could be the prime minister causing Mahathir to be the most suitable candidate. However, the component parties in the PH agreed for Mahathir to be the prime minister for a temporary period only, and the post will be handed over to Anwar when he is released.

On 9 May 2018, PH's hard work paid off as the new coalition won the election by defeating the seemingly unbeatable BN regime. With this victory, Mahathir was appointed as the prime minister for the second time, creating another milestone in Malaysia's history. With the new administration in charge, PH was seen ready to implement election promises, especially on institutional and political reforms. Among other promises was the pledge to limit the power of the prime minister and to restructure the Prime Minister's Department (Funston, 2018). This included not allowing the prime minister to simultaneously hold other ministerial posts, especially the post of finance minister. These reforms were designed to avoid the debacle of the political culture which had been practised by the previous BN regime which had filled the executive body with yes-men. The reform initiative also was an effort to reintroduce a collective cabinet administration.

Soon after resuming office, however, Mahathir's PH administration moved away from the election promises. In the first few weeks after forming the government, he nominated himself as the education minister, which made many starts to doubt the PH reform agenda. He made many other decisions which violated the election promises. The appointment of Latheefa Koya, the Supreme Council member of the People's Justice Party (PKR) as the Chief Commissioner of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) contradicted the PH manifesto which had guaranteed that the appointment of Commissioners must be validated democratically by the parliament. Mahathir, however, reiterated his government's commitment to pursue even more institutional reforms (Wan Jan, 2020). With many broken promises, it can be argued that Mahathir's power was left unchecked, especially by the cabinet.

Although many within PH remained critical of Mahathir's actions, it never changed his decision to deviate from the promises made. This has raised questions about the power of the prime minister. So, this article discusses Mahathir's first and second terms as prime minister and examines PH's commitment to reduce the prime minister's power and its progress from 2018 until the end of the PH

administration. This article argues that after more than two years in power, the dominance of the prime minister was still growing despite the limitations established, and that this signals the endurance of prime ministerial domination of the political system.

Theoretical framework: Explaining the asymmetrical power of prime minister in Malaysia

Prior to inheriting the British system, the nature of power in traditional Malaysian politics was elitist, hierarchical and top-down. Adaptation to the Westminster system had strengthened the centre and made the governance system more preponderance towards the centre. It is therefore necessary to understand the Westminster system of government in order to understand the nature of power in modern Malaysia. According to Johnson and Milner (2005), the governing system in Malaysia has assimilated local values and was designed with local interest and peculiarities in mind. In this respect, a traditional governing element in the Malay political system was assimilated with the Westminster style, which resulted in a hybrid political system. This system is underpinned by the principle of parliamentary sovereignty which constitutionally allows for the overturning of any law by a majority in parliament (Richards & Smith, 2002). From both the traditional perspective and the current government system, this system ostensibly implies that the power is positioned at the centre, thus making it easy for both to assimilate it.

Rhodes and Wanna (2009) argue the variation of Westminster definition centred around the idea of centralisation and hierarchy. It emphasised on the hierarchy in Westminster system and highlighted the elements of centralisation in the parliamentary state. These two outlined features are important in understanding the Westminster political system especially the power of the executive and the prime minister. While they elaborate on the aforementioned features, this article argues these features have in fact strengthen the power of the prime minister as it contributes to the asymmetrical power in the political system.

The centralised power determines the main actors who dominates the political system. Smith (2015) argued that the underpinning Westminster model explains why power is concentrated in the central institution of state. The central institution plays a greater role in governing compared with other institutions and levels of government. This has consequently led to highly centralised domination, especially the predominance of the prime minister in the administration process. As asserts by Gamble (1990), underpinning Westminster system is strong cabinet government that concentrated on the political elite and the central political

institutions of the state. This model enabled successive prime ministers to marshal substantial political support for their continuing role.

Another feature emphasised by Westminster model is it implies strict hierarchical relationship (Rhodes & Wanna, 2009). The emphasis on this hierarchy can be clearly seen through the relationship of actors and the division of powers in the political system. In this regard, Bergman, Müller, Strøm, and Magnus (2003) argue that the range of prime ministerial powers might suggest that under parliamentary government, the cabinet is a strict hierarchy, in which all the individual 'line' ministers are fully and equally subordinated to the prime minister. This hierarchical relationship has therefore created a strong sense of power in the hand of prime minister to assert control over the subordinate. In some cases, this power is enshrined in the constitution and it has established a hierarchical command structure. But then, the power of prime minister rests not only on such constitutional foundations, but also on how secure they are in office, or in other words, what mechanism being used to sustain their power. In classical Westminster model, centralisation and hierarchy has reinforced the executive power especially the prime minister thus creating the asymmetrical power distribution in the political system.

In Malaysia, the domination of the executive is the reflection of the Westminster system. In this system, the power is highly centralised, and the practice of hierarchy is apparent. Wanna (2014) argues the adaptation to Westminster system has safeguards the asymmetrical dominance of the executive over the other actors in the system. This system was designed to allow the majority party who controls the parliament to form the government and consequently control it through the executive. Therefore, it allows the executive especially the prime minister to sustain the power and retains its domination through the control of the government.

In exercising his power, this article argues that the prime minister created a network around his office which enabled him to ensure greater control of the executive in the whole policy process. The expansion of the Prime Minister's Department (PMD) in Malaysia under Mahathir was a manifestation of this argument. The creation of the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and the Implementation and Coordination Unit (ICU) within the PMD which both had direct control of national policy planning and implementation gave the prime minister ultimate power in the administration of the country. Even though in June 2018 the EPU was put under the purview of the minister of economic affairs, the prime minister retained massive influence in determining the economic direction. This has therefore allowed the executive to draft an economic plan to manipulate the country's economic resources for the political agenda and interest (Shin &

Aslam, 2013). The establishment of a Council of Eminent Persons by Mahathir in 2018 to act as an advisory council to the prime minister especially in economic matters clearly indicated Mahathir's role in controlling the economic management of the country (Kamaruddin & Rogers, 2020).

The establishment of the units within the PMD to control the administration demonstrated that the prime minister strategically seeks to strengthen his position. The significant increase of institutionalisation under the prime minister clearly confirmed that he had progressively developed his policy capacity to dominate the executive by being the sole actor with the authority to coordinate the policies and activities of cabinet members (Richards & Smith, 2006). The strategic measures taken by the prime minister effectively secured his capacity and control in consolidating his power. Apart from power accumulation, the concentration of resources and influence resulted in the strong personalisation of power (Ostwald, 2017). This inherent characteristic of Malaysian politics started under Mahathir and was followed by his successors.

The concentration of power in the PMD enabled the prime minister to strengthen his position in Malaysian politics, but it was never free from conflict, especially institutional conflict. Whereas the prime minister had oversight of national economic development through the EPU, the finance minister was responsible for the nation's economic performance; this demarcation inevitably created conflict between them. The Anwar-Mahathir saga of 1998, for example, can be linked to this factor. The ideological struggle between a nationalist Mahathir and more market-oriented Anwar resulted in fundamental disagreement about how to handle the financial crisis (Jomo, 2006; Arakaki, 2009). The removal of Anwar later that year made way for Mahathir to appoint Daim Zainuddin, his confidant and former finance minister, to the cabinet to direct Malaysia's economic policy (Felker, 1999). When Daim stepped down from the cabinet in 2001, Mahathir acted as finance minister until he stepped down in 2003. It was his successor Abdullah who started to make this practice a new governing tradition in Malaysia. The practice of the prime minister simultaneously serving as minister of finance further strengthens the PMD (Ostwald, 2017).

The Najib administration from 2009 until 2018 followed this practice and later created a new institutional crisis in Malaysia when Najib was linked to the biggest corruption scandal in the history of Malaysia through his involvement in 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), a subsidiary owned by Malaysia's Ministry of Finance. As the prime minister, minister of finance and chairman of 1MDB, Najib was the sole signatory for all of the company's investments, giving him vast control over the board. Later, the scandal erupted and triggered popular resentment and elite-level challenges (Case, 2017; Gabriel, 2018). This crisis created

another level on the spectrum of Malaysian politics when the prime minister removed dissenters within the government, including his deputy prime minister, minister of rural development and the chief minister of Kedah, as a move to consolidate his political leadership (Saleem & Han, 2015). This action saved his position and regained support, thus demonstrating the vital role that his leadership could play with the huge amount of power and resources at his disposal.

The Westminster system in Malaysia also strengthened the position of prime minister in that it presupposes a hierarchy in the exercise of power. Bujard (2019) explained that the hierarchy approach makes the executives and especially the prime minister a dominant player in the system. The hierarchical approach has sustained the asymmetrical dominance of the executives in the system and set the relationship between the centre and the other actors. The adoption of the concept of hierarchy can be clearly seen in party politics, especially in UMNO, the party to which the prime minister belonged from 1957 to 2018. In this regard, obedience to the prime minister was established because of his position as party leader, and this enabled him to strengthen his position within the party through the use of patronage. During his tenure as UMNO president, Mahathir largely used the hierarchy system to create loyalty and as a result he managed to secure his position when confronted by rivals within UMNO in 1987 and 1998 (Jomo, 2006).

Although the establishment of a modern political system in Malaysia based on the Westminster system led to the strengthening of central government domination, the prime minister is not immune from challenges which can remove him from the position. The system does not give absolute power and advantages to the prime minister and it can be challenged. However, despite these challenges, most of the time the prime minister has been able to sustain his position due to the nature of the asymmetrical advantages. These asymmetric imbalances have predominantly enabled the prime minister to play a central role and dominate other actors in any governing process (Jensen & Seeberg, 2015). It works perfectly well within a system which has a hierarchy as the dominant mode of governance, suggesting that the unequal distributions of resources within the executive will privilege the prime minister and disadvantage others.

As the resources are asymmetrically distributed, the prime minister is highly resourced and has at his disposal a breadth of power with which to retain influence and control. This argument is a reflection of the principal underpinning political system which emphasises that the core executive knows best (Marsh, Richards, & Smith, 2003). From this perspective, any initiatives brought about by the prime minister will strengthen his position. Much of the initiative is designed to increase control rather than move towards subsidiarity Mahathir's unilateral

decisions on the succession issue and his early attempt to create a new Malay-centric coalition clearly indicate his ability to assert power. This is what Stoker (2000) termed as a classic example of a hierarchy approach.

The inherent advantage of the prime minister will not be complete without taking into account the pattern of asymmetrical power which exists. Much of the political analysis neglects this aspect and considers access to political resources to be balanced. A deconstruction of Malaysian politics must begin by recognising that there is asymmetrical power in access and acknowledging that political authority has an absolute advantage in political systems and processes. Mahathir made use of this asymmetrical nature to retain his power, causing analysts to regard him as an autocratic prime minister. However, this paper argues that asymmetrical power did not give the prime minister an absolute power, but advantage to maintain his power.

This article uses asymmetric power model to assess the domination of prime minister. The study is based on books, journals, newspaper articles, and party publications. Methodologically, the qualitative research method is used in this article as it is exploratory in nature that allows a phenomenon to be understood in more depth. In relation to this article, the domination of prime minister is explored to confirm the argument made.

Mahathir's first term as prime minister

The power of Malaysia's prime minister is not absolute. The prime minister is bound by constitutional limitations in the performance of his duties, and this has been a major challenge for the prime minister. Although having the power to determine the cabinet in helping him to run the administration, the prime minister is bound by the collective responsibilities of the executive body. In Malaysia, the same challenge has been faced by every prime minister. For example, Mahathir's early days as prime minister were not easy. Unlike the neighbouring country of the Philippines which was economically dependent on the former American colonialist after the independence (Hussin, 1995), Mahathir exhibits an anti-western attitude in the beginning of his administration. He introduced new goals for the country with a vision of cutting Malaysia free from former colonial ties and building the country into a respected and strong member of the international community (Chin, 2018; Funston, 2018). He encountered many challenges from members of his cabinet and his own political party, UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) such as challenging his position as the president of the party.

Despite the limitations, Mahathir's premiership from 1981 to 2003 was seen as more dominant than under any previous prime ministers. Hwang (2003)

and Slater (2003) argue Mahathir gave himself outrageous powers because he believed that near-absolute power was necessary for governing the country. His domination transformed UMNO into the dominant political player in Malaysian politics. Since he took over as prime minister until his last election in 1999, Mahathir managed to secure a two-thirds majority in parliament despite the persistent demands for change. The increase in power enabled him to control the cabinet and concentrate power in his own hands, leading to him being labelled an autocrat. Gomez (2016) criticised Mahathir total control over policy making, which had previously been the responsibility of the executive, and he was accused of causing the destruction of the country's democratic institutions. The main question to be examined, therefore is, why Mahathir's power increased and why he became more dominant than the previous prime minister. In answering the question, this article proposes three explanations.

First, Mahathir increased control over the executive body by ensuring that he played the prime role in determining the country's policy and direction. Most of the time, he was the sole decision maker in shaping national policies, which was evidence of his control and influence over the executive body. This ensured the predominance of the prime minister in the administration process and enabled him to impose a common goal among the executive members. This technique had previously been used by the country's second prime minister, Tun Razak, when he introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) after the country had undergone a political crisis and a breakdown in social order. As a measure to stabilise the country's politics, the government formed was controlled by the Malay Muslims, especially from UMNO, thus making it easier for the prime minister to control the administration of the government (Mohamad, 1996). According to Balasubramaniam (2012), Razak had pursued a more ethnocentric program while simultaneously creating a strong central government and a much-weakened parliament which could not oppose it. The introduction of this policy thus, enabled Razak's influence to grow as the NEP became the country's leading policy which dictated the working of the executive.

During Mahathir's administration, he continued using this policy as it had significant support especially from the Malays. This policy was merged with the Industrial Policy to produce more Malay entrepreneurs (Gomez, 2016). Vision 2020 was introduced by Mahathir in the early 1990s outlining the country's plans to achieve advanced state status by 2020. Changes in the overall economic development landscape were introduced by Mahathir and this was the main focus of the government at that time (Fleming & Søborg, 2019). What distinguished Mahathir from the previous prime minister was how he used the old policy which had a great influence on society and adapted it to the new policy. Wain (2009)

averted Mahathir's action to introduce many new policies such as the Look-East and Privatisation policies to ensure that he could control the working of the executive and sustain his predominance. This ascertains that the principal role of the prime minister was to ensure that he played a key role in determining the direction of the country and dominating Malaysia's administration.

Another aspect of the prime minister's power is his/her predominance in the political system. Heffernan (2003) used the term 'predominance' to describe a prime minister's tendency to dominate the executive body. Predominance gives the prime minister potential leadership in the government because s/he can use available resources to enhance institutional capacity. The introduction of the NEP, Vision 2020 and the New Economic Model are manifestations of the prime minister's predominance in Malaysia. Mahathir succeeded in using key policies to dominate the ministries, thus allowing him to set the direction of the ministries. The transformation of the nation into an industrialised society by 2020 had been the main agenda of most of the ministries and achieving the vision had been the top priority. This was therefore the ultimate tool for Mahathir to strengthen his predominance.

Because of this predominance, in many cases, the prime minister acted alone without regard to the views of the cabinet or executive. This created a situation called prime minister's government, which limits or permanently disrupts the role of the cabinet in government administration. The development of the Malaysian economy during the Mahathir era was a reflection of Mahathir's ideas individually. Wain (2009) argued that "Mahathir brought strong and idiosyncratic ideas to the economy, thus it needs to be exercised with control to achieve its objectives. Consequently, conflict arose between him and ministers as he tried to limit the role of the ministers in administration" (p. 89). For example, the conflict between Mahathir and his finance minister, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, arose because Razaleigh objected Mahathir's obsession with spending large amounts of money to support his personal projects, such as Perwaja Steel, Proton and Penang Bridge, which were not included in the country's five-year plan (Siddiquee, 2008). This clash happened frequently during Mahathir's prime ministership as a consequence of his desire to act alone.

Second, Mahathir's patronage politics coupled with the neo-feudal mentality in the Malaysian politics had also strengthened his power. Loyalty shown by his followers would be rewarded with a position in the government. Jeshurun (1993) stated that, axiomatically, the primary source of political loyalty to Malaysia's prime minister has been his hold over UMNO. Major challenges to Mahathir within the party occurred twice, in 1987 and 1998 when he was challenged by Tengku Razaleigh and Anwar Ibrahim respectively. Both

occurrences resulted in splitting the party and indirectly generated a new opposition party. Both times, Mahathir managed to expel his contender and successfully reunite the party to further consolidate his position.

The concept of loyalty to the leader has existed in Malaysia's political system since the feudal era. Muzaffar (1979) argues that the practice of feudal-era adherence within Malay society continued to be a vital element of Malaysian political values. The issue of loyalty within UMNO was nothing new. In 1986, Mahathir faced a party challenge when UMNO split into two camps, one led by Mahathir-Ghafar and the other by Tengku Razaleigh-Musa. Because of their disloyalty, several cabinet members who supported the latter were dropped and Mahathir replaced them with those who had supported him (Shamsul, 1988). This practice of patronage finally consolidated Mahathir's power and strengthened his political domination. As a result, neither the party nor the government were able to question his actions. Mahathir viewed questioning him as a threat to his power. The cabinet had no choice but to remain silent and stay loyal to Mahathir, thus creating absolute obedience among the party members.

Third, Mahathir became more dominant because he used the Prime Minister's Department (PMD) to strengthen his position. The PMD had grown into an important institution which controlled not only the administration but also the setting and development of national policies. To facilitate control over policy, Mahathir established units such as the Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU) and the Economic Delivery Unit (EDU) to enable the coordination and implementation of government policies. These units had the same features. First, they reported directly to the prime minister's office. Second, they coordinated policy activities at the federal, state and local levels and implemented policies set by the PMD (Hutchinson, 2014; Ostwald, 2017). As the focus of power in deciding this policy and agenda was in the hands of the PMD, it provided the prime minister with the opportunity to influence and dominate the country's main policies.

Although Mahathir had strengthened his position as prime minister through the various means discussed above, it does raise serious concern in the political debate as to whether his increased political power posed a threat to the democratic system. Slater (2003) argued that the personalisation of power during Mahathir's prime ministership had created an authoritarian political institution in Malaysia which eventually undermined democratic institutions such as parliament, cabinet and bureaucracy. In various respects, as many scholars of Malaysian politics have argued (Hwang, 2003; Wain, 2009; Ostwald, 2017), the prime minister's actions to strengthen this power have denied the proper role of cabinet members and have led the prime minister to be labelled an autocrat.

Interestingly, although he was seen as an autocratic leader, it was his leadership that led him to succeed in overcoming the financial crisis in 1998 and maintaining the country's political stability. During his period in office, he managed to lead BN to victory in every general election with a two-thirds majority victory until he resigned in 2003.

Mahathir's return: How did he come to power for the second time?

The return of Mahathir into Malaysian politics was long awaited by many Malaysians. Although he had retired from politics in 2003, he continued to be an astute political critic. His leading role in Malaysian politics led Chin (2015) to label him a slayer of Malaysian prime ministers: he played vital roles in deposing three prime ministers. He heavily criticised the two prime ministers after him, Abdullah and Najib, due to what he perceived as incompetence in managing the country. Prior to that, he wrote an open letter to Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first prime minister, blaming his pro-Chinese policies as directly responsible for the May 13 racial riot, and called for Tunku's resignation as prime minister and head of UMNO. This had led to Tunku's fall (Wain, 2009). Given his reputation, it is not surprising that PH had high expectations on Mahathir to overthrow the BN regime.

However, what is interesting to explore is not just the role of Mahathir as prime minister slayer, but how he was able to emerge as the focus of Malaysian politics. His re-emergence is considered by many to have been a timely way to save Malaysia from a political crisis and help the country to survive the biggest scandal involving prime minister Najib in the 1MDB case. The discussion here therefore focuses on the re-emergence of Mahathir and the new political coalition in Malaysia to oust the Najib regime.

After successfully unseating Abdullah by creating an anti-Abdullah group within UMNO, Mahathir supported Najib as the prime minister to carry on the country's ambitious agenda which he had crafted (Chin & Puyok, 2010). His support for Najib is seen as justified because Abdullah had failed to develop the country. The saga between Mahathir and Abdullah led Mahathir to leave UMNO in 2009 and only agree to re-join after Najib was made prime minister. However, Mahathir's support for Najib did not last long. In 2015, he began to criticise Najib's administration which he saw as increasingly irrelevant and problematic, especially Najib's involvement in the 1MDB scandal (Abdullah, 2019). This led Mahathir to leave UMNO again and he launched a movement to oust Najib. With support beginning to decline within UMNO, Najib responded by strengthening the party's support base and firing those who questioned his actions and administration (Case, 2017). In order to strengthen the support, those who loyal to

him were rewarded with positions within government and this consolidated his position as prime minister.

The opposite happened to Mahathir. After leaving UMNO, he had no strong political platform and no resources to attract more supporters who could be used to challenge Najib. Fortunately, Mahathir managed to attract support from disgruntled UMNO members, including his son Mukhriz, the ousted Kedah Menteri Besar; Muhiyiddin, the ousted deputy prime minister; and Shafie Apdal, the ousted minister of rural and regional development. They were expelled from UMNO after openly and heavily criticising Najib's involvement with the 1MDB scandal (Case, 2017; Abdullah, 2019). In addition, as a man of great influence in UMNO for a long time, Mahathir had also managed to draw the support of UMNO veterans and also those who had been exiled, as well as grassroots support. Together, they formed a new political party to replace UMNO as the dominant party for the Malay community.

Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia or Bersatu (Malaysian United Indigenous Party—PPBM), the new nationalist party, was formed on 8 September 2016 with Mahathir as its Chairman. However, Mahathir realised that Bersatu alone would not be able to overthrow UMNO. Thus, the idea of working with an old political enemy then came up. This idea arose on the grounds that the opposition alliance was in a difficult situation after the fall of Pakatan Rakyat (PR) due to the PAS (Islamic Party Malaysia) withdrawing from the PR and opting to work with UMNO (Funston, 2018). PAS's links with UMNO then caused the party to split because some of the party leaders thought that the damage done by UMNO was unforgivable. They therefore left PAS and established a new party known as Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) and continued the cooperation with the PKR and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). Realising the urgent need to form a new political coalition, Mahathir approached his old enemies to reconcile for the benefit of the country. Finally, after eighteen years of hostility, Mahathir went to meet Anwar to start a new beginning for Malaysian politics (Wan Jan, 2020).

Even though Mahathir's Bersatu was a new Malay nationalist party compared to other parties in the coalition which representing the country's pluralistic society, PH did not face major problems in building this political coalition. Without the Malay party in the coalition, PH would have problems defeating UMNO. This can be clearly seen in a series of by-elections before 2018 in which without the Malay support, the opposition coalition failed to win despite having many resources which could guarantee a win. Mahathir's approach to working with PH was therefore deemed vital for the establishment of a robust opposition coalition.

In another development, Mahathir managed to pull together support not just from the opposition, but also from the NGOs to sign a Citizens' Declaration in March 2016 to call for Najib's resignation. This was an unprecedented show of solidarity across the political divide; civil society leaders and opposition politicians joined their former rival Mahathir to sign a declaration backing his call for the removal of Najib Razak (Case, 2017). Mahathir-led Bersatu was eventually accepted as a new member of PH. Finally, PH nominated Mahathir as a candidate for the 14th general election. The agreement announced on Friday 14 July 2017 was crucial for the opposition alliance with the general election just months away (Hutchinson, 2018). Despite opposition from some quarters of PH affiliates, the decision to nominate Mahathir was widely accepted by the majority of members. Abdullah (2019) and Welsh (2018) argued that Mahathir's presence was crucial to PH's victory as he provided the credibility boost which the opposition particularly needed to convince the Malay voters.

Mahathir's second term: The endurance of prime minister's power

In the aftermath of the 14th general election, after being appointed as the 7th Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir promised to make a difference in his second term. If he was previously seen as an autocrat, in his second term he promised a cabinet government with full commitment to restoring the country's democratic system. However, the main question was whether Mahathir in PH a different Mahathir from when he was with BN? This article argues that there was not much difference in the prime minister's power be it during BN or PH. Although PH had pledged reform especially in limiting the power of the prime minister, there were particular actions which were deemed violating their promises, especially actions by Mahathir himself.

The earliest signs of his domination in the new administration era were seen in the first month. On 17 May 2018, just a week after winning the election, Mahathir announced the proposed names of new cabinet members to be presented to the king. What came as a shock to many was his decision to nominate himself as minister of education. Although there were no rules saying that this decision was wrong, the PH election promise clearly stipulated that the prime minister should not hold other ministerial position, especially finance minister, as a means of preventing the accumulation of power in the hands of the prime minister.

Other party members started to question his decision, but Mahathir saw no problem with his judgement. This made many curious about Mahathir's motive and question his seriousness about delivering the reform agenda of PH. Mahathir responded by saying that "I took over the education portfolio because I think so many people are uneducated in this country, so I thought I should give my

attention to that ... But apart from that, I think our way of teaching is outdated. Today with computers and other things, we should devise new ways of teaching” (Channel News Asia, 2018). Although he admitted that there was much to be done in the education system and stated that the government should pay serious attention to it, this cannot be an excuse for violating the election promises, especially in the first month of the new government. However, Mahathir eventually reacted under pressure and refrained from appointing himself as education minister; he appointed a former academic, Dr Maszlee Malik, instead. The selection of a neophyte politician and former academic brought educational experience and less political baggage to that leading position (Lee, 2018).

However, Maszlee only managed to survive for two years as a minister. On 2 February 2020, he announced his resignation from the cabinet. When asked about his resignation, Maszlee replied that he had been made to resign by the prime minister because he was not a good team player in the cabinet and had caused considerable distress to the government (Tee, 2020). Mahathir never responded to that statement. Soon after, Mahathir announced that he was taking over as the acting minister of education and that the cabinet had collectively agreed to this. This raises the question of whether Mahathir had successfully dominated the cabinet and expected them to agree with whatever decision he made. This article suggests that this signified Mahathir’s success in dominating the cabinet and thus made him no different from the BN Mahathir.

Another of his actions which was deemed similar to what he had done in the BN regime was the appointment of cabinet members. During his BN premiership, Mahathir had freedom to appoint cabinet members of his own choice. This is what Hwang (2003) claimed as Mahathir’s personalised leadership. However, his act of appointing cabinet members without prior consultation with the PH’s component parties resulted in discontent in the PH. Although it was generally understood that choosing cabinet members is the prerogative of the prime minister, in the case of PH things were slightly different. The PH consisted of a group of political parties with none being superior to the others, and any decisions were made together. So before nominating cabinet members for the king’s approval, Mahathir needed to get approval from the component parties. This issue of cabinet composition arose when PKR Vice President Rafizi Ramli made a statement accusing Mahathir’s nomination of DAP Secretary General Lim Guan Eng as Finance Minister as being made without the party’s consensus (*The Star*, 2018). Mahathir retaliated, stressing that although he had absolute power in determining the cabinet, he had considered the views of the component parties on how to balance the numbers of ministers.

Believing in domination, after becoming prime minister, Mahathir did not show any sincere commitment to the realisation of election promises. This raised serious queries about the sincerity of Mahathir and also his cabinet. Making matters worse, in July 2018, Mahathir issued a statement saying that the election manifesto was not a bible but merely a guideline for the government (*The Sun Daily*, 2018). This statement attracted attention not only from the opposition but also the people and PH members. Mahathir's statement was repeated by the then Bersatu Deputy Strategic Director, Wan Saiful, saying that election promises are just guidelines, and that the government had no obligation to make good on them (Annuar, 2018). Wan Saiful, who had drafted PH's manifesto, also claimed that there would be some things which the government could not implement because of PH's inadequate data and access to information when drafting it (Annuar, 2018).

Matters pertaining to institutional reform were also clear evidence of Mahathir's and his cabinet's lack of commitment and willingness. The slow pace of reform was not limited to the political sector but also affected the management of the economy, thus highlighting the inability of the fledgling PH administration to fulfil its promises (Tapsell, 2020). People voted for PH because of its manifesto pledge to introduce institutional reform, but after its decisive victory in the general election, those promises evaporated. Failure to fulfil their election promises made Mahathir and the PH look no different from the previous government. This shows that Mahathir remains the dominant prime minister like his 22-year rule in BN.

Obvious evidence of Mahathir's enduring domination was the mystery over the transfer of power to Anwar Ibrahim. It was an open secret that after winning the election Mahathir would transfer the position of prime minister to Anwar, but no time frame had been set by either man for this. Mahathir repeatedly insisted that he would honour the deal on transferring power to Anwar, but the absence of a substantial plan caused Anwar's enemies to take advantage by creating unrest within PH (Hassan, 2018). Despite his stated intention to transfer power to Anwar, Mahathir was often seen to be deliberately aggravating the situation by making inconsistent statements on the issue. When he became prime minister in May 2018, Mahathir made a clear statement that he would govern for one or two years before handing over to Anwar. He then made another statement that he would stay for two or three years and yet another stressing that the transition would happen after the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in 2020 (Moten, 2020). His inconsistency was supported by his friends and rivals, creating another political environment which was unprecedented in Malaysian politics. Mahathir seemed set to stay on as prime minister beyond the time anyone had imagined, and this created friction within PH itself.

It was this state of internal tension in PH which made PAS and UMNO suggest that Mahathir should remain in office until the next election. The PAS deputy president, Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man, affirmed PAS support for Mahathir and vowed to table a vote of confidence, which was unanimously agreed by the PAS central leadership council (Koya, 2020). The PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang said, "PAS and UMNO wished to see Mahathir complete his term as premier until the next election in order to uphold the interests of the Malays and Muslims" (Hassan, 2019). The debacle deteriorated when Anwar's Deputy in the PKR, Azmin Ali, who was also the Economic Affairs Minister, joined the opposition in calling for Mahathir to serve his full term as prime minister (Hassan, 2019), a statement which clearly contradict an arrangement within the ruling PH coalition for Anwar to take over two years after PH's victory. What is clear about this situation is that Mahathir was seen not trying to unravel the mess that was going on and let this conflict played out. Although this conflict strengthened Mahathir's political base, it was seen to have weakened PH.

Mahathir had once again tried to dominate the government. Although not as crucial as before, Mahathir's actions had raised an important question: why, despite the commitment to reform, he could still dominate Malaysian politics and create a prime ministerial government? The answer lies in the asymmetrical institutional design which enabled the prime minister to dominate by consolidating the power in his hands.

Mahathir's downfall: The failure to consolidate power

Despite having full control over the cabinet and the government, Mahathir's administration with PH did not last long. The 22-month-long administration was overthrown by Mahathir's allies in the Bersatu and some of the PKR members who were trying to prevent Anwar from becoming prime minister. This created another record for Mahathir; he was the longest serving prime minister for 22 years and the shortest serving prime minister, just for 22 months. As a result of Mahathir's downfall, the question arises whether the control of the cabinet was still insufficient for the prime minister to maintain his dominance.

The plausible explanation for Mahathir's downfall lies in the Westminster traditions. As explained earlier, the hierarchy which is fundamental to the formation and strength of the prime minister has shaped the country's political tradition. The practice of this hierarchy gave the prime minister an edge in controlling and strengthening his position in national politics. However, the weaknesses in hierarchy had contributed to the fraction in PH administration. It is apparent when Anwar's supporters in PH began to challenge Mahathir by urging him to announce his resignation date in order to open a path for Anwar to be the

next prime minister. This challenge led the coalition to split into two camps, one supporting Anwar and the other pledging full support for Mahathir to continue as prime minister, the conflict that could have been avoided if Mahathir stick to the planned transfer of power. Welikala (2020) argued that this fraction had created volatile relationship in PH.

Knowing this vulnerability of the PH hierarchy, the opposition parties exploited this situation that later led to the downfall of Mahathir and the PH. The ultra-Malay UMNO and the Islamist PAS had both pledged their support for Mahathir to remain in office until the end of his term. In fact, as pointed earlier, PAS planned to submit a motion of confidence in the Dewan Rakyat to express its support for Mahathir's leadership. The PH's members of parliament who had vowed to support Mahathir had secretly formed a pact with the opposition to thwart Anwar's quest to become prime minister (Moten, 2020). So, on 23 February 2020, its president, Muhiyiddin Yassin announced Bersatu's decision to leave PH. This announcement surprised many, including Mahathir himself. So as there was now no dominant party in the coalition, the hierarchical structure has become fragile, and this eventually led to the downfall of Mahathir and the PH.

Another reason contributed to the downfall of Mahathir is the infirmity of centralisation. As pointed earlier, the effect of this hierarchy was the formation of top-down government and a centralised political system. This centralised political system made the prime minister a very powerful actor—coupled with the support of the coalition political parties, the prime minister enjoyed almost total power in the coalition. The unchallenged forcer of centralisation for decades had made the BN regime dominant, and this further strengthened the centralisation (Yusoff, 2006). The hegemony of the BN ruling party was only challenged in the 2008 general election. BN did not just dominate the federal government but has been a dominant political party in almost all thirteen states in Malaysia since independence. Due to these, state governments acted as just extensions of the centre rather than as partners in the federation. Since the same political party governed the federal body and the states, federal/state relations were characterised by inter- and intra-party relations (Tajudin & Yusoff, 2020). Because of intra-party control, BN state governments behaved more like branches than partners of the federal government. In this regard, the BN central leadership decided the state leadership before it received royal consent. This practice made the states politically and administratively subordinate to the centre.

The coalition practices under PH, however, were different from what Malaysia had experienced under BN. Although the principle of centralisation was still intact, the PH coalition was not dominated by any particular party members: every member enjoyed equal status and the posts were equally distributed. Unlike

BN which set up the posts of president of the coalition and prime minister only for UMNO because of its status as the biggest party in the coalition, PH was seen as more open in this regard. Mahathir was appointed chairman of the coalition and was nominated as the prime minister, but his party only held sixteen of the 119 parliamentary seats won by PH (Wan Jan, 2020). This made the hierarchy in PH vulnerable because the absolute support for the prime minister only came from the minority group in PH.

Another factor associated with the downfall of Mahathir and the PH was that Mahathir had become prime minister with the minority party in PH. As previously explained, under the BN, UMNO had dominated the coalition and remained unchallenged as it was the biggest party. PH, however, had a fragile hierarchy and that allowed it to be challenged. The hierarchy was the foundation of the prime minister's domination and this fragile hierarchy made it difficult for Mahathir to fully dominate the political process. Since he was from the minority party in the coalition and there was an agreement made by the coalition members to hand over the prime ministership to Anwar, Mahathir was frequently put under pressure to set the date for the transfer of power and even to resign (Chin, 2020). All these pressures challenged the domination and the position of Mahathir as prime minister and as a result, Mahathir's Bersatu party and the group which did not support Anwar in the PH were dissatisfied and threatened to leave the coalition if the pressure on Mahathir to step down continued. What was certain for Bersatu was that the practice of unchallenged hierarchy had led to political dominance for decades and it was their responsibility to defend this practice. However, as PH agreed to consociation politics, Bersatu tried to fall back on racial politics, thus creating an episode of conflict within PH.

The two factors discussed above led to Mahathir's downfall as he failed to convince his own party to be patient and accept new political practices in Malaysia. Although Mahathir remained calm during that saga and believed that he could still consolidate his power in PH, his supporters did the opposite. The plan to leave PH was so well crafted that Mahathir knew nothing about it. Another unique event in Malaysian politics was that the people who had supported the strong hierarchy were now the people planning a coup against Mahathir. Together with Azmin Ali, Anwar's deputy in the PKR party who openly criticised him, the new political alliance was announced on the night of 23 February 2020. What is clear is that Bersatu and Mahathir had no political will to hand over the prime ministership to Anwar, fearing that they would lose the Malay political support (Chin, 2020). The announcement made by the Bersatu and Azmin allies in the PKR to leave PH created a political crisis in Malaysia and eventually; the fall of PH after just 22 months in government. Bersatu was ready to ally with the opposition to

form a new government, but Mahathir refused to accept the idea of working with UMNO. In an unexpected turn of events, Mahathir resigned, giving way for the king to appoint Muhyiddin Yassin as the eighth prime minister of Malaysia.

Conclusion

The return of Mahathir into Malaysian politics sparked mixed reactions from political analysts. Although he had been out of politics for more than ten years, his wisdom and experience still had an impact not just on the government but also the people. For this reason, many turned to him for help when Malaysia was in the midst of the greatest political scandal in its history involving the then prime minister, Najib Razak. The return of Mahathir by teaming up with his former political rival instilled hope in many Malaysians for the future of their country. However, those hopes were vain as the Mahathir-lead PH diverted from their intention to reform. Many election promises were not carried out and the most tormenting fact was that Mahathir's power seems to have been left unchecked, especially by the cabinet, thus raising a question about the effort to bring back cabinet government. Mahathir was seen to be comfortable with the power he had and managed to evade the original agreement to hand over the premiership to Anwar.

In conclusion, the discussion has shown that Mahathir during his second reign remains dominant and unchanged, however not due to his autocratic attitude, but because of the asymmetrical power that exist which give the inherent advantage to the prime minister. This asymmetrical power gave coherent advantages to the prime minister because much power was concentrated in his hands. This inequality is an important aspect of Malaysia's political system. It both restricts and facilitates the actions, and possible successes, of individuals and groups of interest in Malaysian politics. Second, the Westminster system in Malaysia also strengthened the position of the prime minister as it presupposes a hierarchy in the exercise of power. The hierarchy approach in the system made the prime minister dominant players in the system. This hierarchical approach sustained the asymmetrical dominance of the executives over the other actors in the system and set the relationship between the centre and the other actors. However, the adoption of the hierarchical approach was not as strong under PH compared with BN. This was primarily due to the spirit of power-sharing under PH, which was not dominated by any particular party, thus created a fragile hierarchy which left the prime minister vulnerable to challenge. Although Mahathir was never challenged openly in PH, the pressure put on him to transfer the power to Anwar had created a friction in PH which eventually led to his downfall.

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