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MALAYSIA: TURNOVER WITHOUT CHANGE

Thomas B. Pepinsky

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By many accounts, Malaysian politics entered a new era on 31 October 2003, when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad finally stepped aside in favor of his chosen successor, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Mahathir had ruled Malaysia since 1981, while his political approach of favoring ethnic Malays—a group accounting for just over half of Malaysia’s 25 million people—had shaped the country since 1970, the year that he published an influential tract calling for economic redistribution to benefit Malays as well as greater Malay domination of politics. The end of Mahathir’s rule seemed to many to signal a sea change in Malaysia’s politics, which had become increasingly authoritarian under Mahathir’s personalistic sway. Abdullah—known to Malaysians by the folksy nickname of Pak Lah (Uncle Lah)—has a reputation as a clean politician with little of the confrontational temperament that made his predecessor so controversial.

But does this leadership turnover signify more extensive changes in Malaysian politics? Events in the slightly more than three years since Abdullah took over suggest that the answer is no. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) continues to function as *primus inter pares* among the parties that make up the ruling National Front (BN) coalition. Abdullah is a seasoned political insider: He has been a member of UMNO since 1965 and of Parliament since 1978. Accusations of “money politics” and corruption notwithstanding, UMNO and the BN swept the 21 March 2004 general elections, the first held under Abdullah’s premiership. The Front took almost 64 percent of the popular vote and won 199 of the 219 elected seats in the Dewan Rakyat,

Parliament's lower house. The stage had been set for this overwhelming incumbents' triumph by the 2001 breakup of the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front) opposition coalition, which had included the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), the People's Justice Party (PKR), and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). In 2004, the DAP gained slightly by going from 10 to 12 seats, while PAS saw its lower-house seat share dwindle from 27 to 7 and the PKR went from 5 seats to just a single seat. Proponents of a "New Politics" for Malaysia, based on greater public concern for social justice, *reformasi* (reform), and a new sense of solidarity across class and ethnic lines could take little comfort in these results and the Abdullah-era "politics as usual" toward which they pointed.¹

At the midpoint of Abdullah's first term, then, Malaysian politics is far more about continuity than change. The National Front remains united while opposition politicians struggle to create a credible alternative. The overt repression that punctuated Mahathir's tenure has been absent, but this reflects Abdullah's relatively secure footing rather than any genuine move toward liberalization. The regime's most odious antidemocratic laws remain in effect and continue to restrict free association, communication, and most political criticism.

This has implications both for Malaysian politics and for other regimes in which a form of "soft" or "competitive" authoritarianism predominates. The Abdullah government's behavior suggests that in the absence of significant political challenges, autocrats may prudently choose to refrain from deploying the full range of repressive actions. Crushing trivial challenges to the status quo not only takes time and resources, but also runs the risk of counterproductively alienating otherwise neutral citizens. Instead of aggressively policing society, then, autocrats may prefer to lie low while holding on to their ability to impose repression should they judge it necessary. In the short term, what optimistic observers interpret as tentative steps toward political liberalization may in fact be nothing more than strategic decisions designed to preserve an autocratic status quo over the long term.

Autocracy in Malaysia

Assessing Abdullah's rule requires a grasp of the Malaysian political context. The country has enjoyed almost continuous electoral competition since gaining independence from Britain in 1957, with few restrictions on party formation or electoral contestation. The Front has helped to ensure that Malaysians enjoy a high standard of living by regional standards—GDP per capita in 2005 was US\$12,100. The government's goal of achieving full development by 2020 is ambitious but not unreasonable. From a substantive democratic perspective, the regime does a fairly good job of representing the interests of its largest constituency, the *bumiputras*. This term, which in Malay means "sons

of the soil," denotes all Malaysian citizens who are neither of Chinese nor Indian descent, or in other words all those considered to represent the indigenous inhabitants of Malaysia.

Ethnicity is the dominant political cleavage. In addition to the slightly more than half the populace that is ethnically Malay, *bumiputras* of non-Malay extraction (this means mostly people who hail from Malaysia's portion of the island of Borneo) comprise 11 percent, making *bumiputras* as a whole slightly more than three-fifths of the citizenry. Ethnic-Chinese Malaysians account for about 24 percent, while Indians comprise 7 percent and the remaining 8 percent consists mostly of ethnic Thais and Eurasians. Since colonial times, Chinese Malaysians have largely resided in urban and suburban areas of both Borneo and the Malay Peninsula. Indian Malaysians may be found in both urban and rural areas, mostly in the western and southern portions of the Peninsula. Malays have traditionally dominated the Malaysian countryside, but since the 1970s have moved to cities in numbers large enough to make it no longer accurate to speak of the ethnic Chinese as "dominating" urban Malaysia.

Malay urbanization and the growth of the Malay middle class have had little effect on the political divides separating Malays from non-Malays. In Malaysian Borneo, a complex mix of non-Malay *bumiputras* and Malays dominates the rural areas, though again, many have moved to cities in recent years. Non-Malay *bumiputras* are handicapped politically by scant numbers, relative geographic isolation, and various internal ethnic and religious differences: Many are Christians or animists, and religious divides exist within ethnic groups. Though "sons of the soil" they may be, in reality they benefit from few of the redistributive programs that Malays enjoy.

The main *bumiputra* party has always been the UMNO, a strictly Malay group whose 110 lower-house seats make it by far the strongest BN member. The rest of the Front consists of the Malaysian Chinese Association (31 seats), the ostensibly multiethnic but Chinese-dominated Malaysian People's Movement (10 seats), the Malaysian Indian Congress (9 seats), and an ever-changing roster of small parties from Borneo. All the junior parties must content themselves with token cabinet seats while the "power portfolios" of Defense, Internal Security, Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Education go to UMNO insiders. The president and deputy president of UMNO always hold the offices of prime minister and deputy prime minister, and every finance minister since 1974 has belonged to the party.

Although Malaysia's political system has several institutionally democratic facets, including most importantly the regular holding of multiparty elections, the regime has so far proven unwilling to adopt fair electoral practices. A common abuse is the presence of *pengundi hantu* (phantom voters) in rural elections. The term denotes voters who

reside outside a given district, but appear there at election time in order to cast ballots for the government's candidates. The names of these ghosts appear on the voter rolls, which is odd given the frequency with which actual residents who have registered nonetheless find their names missing from these same rolls on election day. In many instances, phantom voters arrive by the hundreds—more than enough to swing a typical rural election—and seem to benefit from UMNO's organizational support. A 1992 by-election in the rural northern district of Bukit Payung led to charges that whole busloads of phantom voters had been hauled in from factories elsewhere in Peninsular Malaysia, and also that individuals seeking to evade detection by opposition-party workers had engaged in organized infiltration of the district before election day.²

The ruling coalition also uses subtler means to steer elections in its favor. Two well-known tactics are the *kepala sepuluh* (head of ten) and *anak angkat* (adopted child) systems. "Heads of ten" are local UMNO representatives who have responsibility for ten individuals within a constituency. The heads' official job is to turn these individuals out as BN voters, but their unofficial functions are just as important. They can keep higher party officers informed about which individuals should receive rewards, such as development minigrants, in return for loyalty. Combined with the practice of counting votes at the level of the local polling station, this gives the regime an accurate map of its electoral support.

"Adopted children" take this practice even further. These are UMNO party workers who receive a modest payment from the party to take up residence within individual households during the run-up to elections. Their "parents," the residents of these households, also receive cash for taking in the party workers. The job of the party workers is to exhort their hosts to vote for the BN, and if it becomes clear that their hosts will not do so, to discourage them from voting at all. "Adopted children" also keep away opposition-party workers, preventing them from marshaling the kind of grassroots support that UMNO enjoys.

Practices such as these constitute the lowest level of money politics. Over the last three decades, money politics on a far grander scale has become prevalent. The Malaysian political scientist Terence Gomez has shown just how widespread money politics has become, in particular under the leadership of Mahathir and his associate, former finance minister and special government advisor Daim Zainuddin.³ Privatization schemes, government tenders, and state-run *bumiputra* unit trust funds give officials ready sources of patronage that they can use to woo influential businesspeople. Because the spoils of office are so rich, competitions for office itself have become occasions for some of the most outrageous examples of money politics, with reports of hundreds of thousands of dollars being spent to secure a single parliamentary seat. Mahathir at times would decry the expansion of money politics at venues such as UMNO party congresses, but his refusal to enact effective

laws to support Malaysia's rather impotent Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) exposed his complaints as mere posturing. Today, intraparty elections are often avenues of rent-seeking for corrupt businesspeople.

If patronage and corruption are the regime's favorite carrots, no one should forget that it wields an impressive array of sticks as well. Malaysian law features a number of repressive ordinances that the regime has used selectively to intimidate or sideline political opposition. The Internal Security Act (ISA) provides for detention without trial for up to two years, with no chance of appeal and only ministerial approval needed for indefinite two-year renewals. The Official Secrets Act bans public discussion of most governmental or parliamentary affairs by members of the public, and since the 1980s this has

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included the details of government tenders or privatization contracts. The Sedition Act includes vague provisions that criminalize any speech by citizens or MPs deemed insulting to the regime, sometimes interpreted as any speech that questions *ketuanan Melayu*, the primacy afforded to Malays under the Malaysian Constitution. The Societies Act requires all civil society organizations to obtain licenses from the Home Affairs minister, allowing the regime to declare any group to be illegal if it engages in activities other than those agreed to by the Registrar of Societies. The Printing Presses and Publications Act requires any publication to obtain a license from the Ministry of Internal Security. Finally, the Universities and University Colleges Act prohibits tertiary students from engaging in political activities. Judicial review of decisions that the government makes in pursuance of these laws is almost nonexistent.

The regime also maintains an extensive, Malay-dominated apparatus of state coercion. The most important unit in the Malaysian Army is the Royal Malay Regiment, which as its name suggests is restricted to ethnic Malays. Non-Malays are more prevalent in the Navy and Air Force, two branches that have less ability to impose massive repression. Aside from some of its senior detectives, the Royal Malaysian Police is also heavily Malay. In addition to investigating crimes and maintaining law and order, police forces play an important internal-security role through branches including the Federal Reserve Unit and the Special Branch. A more loosely organized coercive force is the Auxiliary Police Volunteer Unit (known as Rela), which again is dominated by Malays. Rela recruits receive arms and basic training in order to function as local-level eyes and ears for the security forces. In this fashion, Malay dominance of the Malaysian security forces helps to preserve Malay political control.

These unattractive characteristics of the Malaysian political system are what prevent all but the most strident regime apologists from viewing Malaysia as a democracy. Instead, most observers place Malaysia's regime somewhere in the middle of a democracy-dictatorship continuum as a "democracy with adjectives." Other terms used include "quasi-," "semi-," or "pseudo-democratic"; "soft authoritarian"; or "authoritarian populist." All these descriptions attempt to capture the observation that Malaysia is not a violent, oppressive dictatorship in the mold of New Order Indonesia or Idi Amin's Uganda, but neither is it true parliamentary democracy.⁴

Ostensibly democratic procedures are a hallmark of Malaysian politics—when times are good. When seriously and directly challenged, the regime will dramatically drop such procedures. Since independence, there have been three such challenges. In the 1969 election, the Alliance (the BN's precursor) failed to achieve a two-thirds majority in the lower house. The regime suspended parliament, declared a state of emergency, and adopted political rules that reinforced UMNO's primacy and the power of the new prime minister. In 1987, Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah challenged Mahathir for the UMNO presidency and hence the premiership. Mahathir rigged the subsequent intraparty election, and when challenged in court, disbanded UMNO in order to recreate it under his own leadership. In 1998, in the midst of the Asian financial crisis that toppled the New Order regime in nearby Indonesia, Mahathir ousted his erstwhile deputy Anwar Ibrahim, whom Mahathir believed held ambitions to replace him. Mahathir then engineered Anwar's conviction on trumped-up charges of corruption and sodomy, purged UMNO of its staunchest Anwar loyalists, and used strong-arm tactics and media manipulation to prevail over a newly united opposition in snap elections.

These brief vignettes show how successive Malaysian governments have been unwilling to surrender their authority to political opponents. Faced with the prospect of losing a vote, leaders retreat from conventional electioneering and use force, fraud, and media control to ensure victory. Conversely, during periods of calm when credible challenges are absent, more conventional electoral politics reigns.

These swings in Malaysian political freedoms did not begin with Mahathir. Abdul Razak Hussein, the premier who took office in 1969, used the National Operations Council, which ruled the country while parliament was suspended, to secure power. His successor Hussein Onn (1976–81) allowed freer competition during his relatively calmer reign. The pattern becomes apparent when one traces Malaysia's standing over time in cross-national indices such as the "Freedom in the World" ratings published every year since 1972 by Freedom House (FH). The FH rankings show a deterioration in Malaysia's standing that corresponds with Mahathir's increased personalization of authority in the late 1980s.

After a modest recovery in the mid-1990s, Mahathir's attack on Anwar Ibrahim led to another downturn, which in turn was followed by a small uptick under Abdullah.

Pak Lah: What's New?

As was the case in the early 1990s under Mahathir, Abdullah's relatively mild rule reflects a more secure ruling party rather than fundamental changes to the regime. Abdullah's 2004 general-election campaign stressed clean government and transparency, drawing an implicit distinction between himself and Mahathir. But the new cabinet named in the wake of the BN victory featured many of the Mahathir-era old guard, including Mahathir's most corrupt allies within the ruling coalition. Malaysian Indian Congress president S. Samy Vellu remained in charge of the Ministry of Public Works, which he has run off and on since 1979. Under Mahathir, Samy was involved in scandals in highway construction and other areas, and he has also been accused of trading irregularities involving an investment trust that his party manages.⁵ Under his new chief, Samy has become embroiled in fresh scandals involving shoddy workmanship on bridges, hospitals, and even the Parliament building itself.⁶ Nevertheless, Samy remains in Abdullah's cabinet, and still dominates the famously corrupt Malaysian Indian Congress.

Another cabinet holdover is International Trade and Industry Minister Rafidah Aziz. The longtime head of UMNO's women's wing, Rafidah has a reputation for less-than-honest dealing that goes back to the 1990s, when the ACA investigated the distribution to her son-in-law of 1.5 million shares in a publicly listed company. In May 2005, Rafidah again entered the spotlight with regard to her ministry's disbursement of Approved Permits (APs) to Malaysian retailers of imported cars. The ostensible purpose of the APs—which are in effect valuable shares of a quota meant to protect the domestic automaking industry—is to allow their predominantly *bumiputra* recipients easier entry into the auto-sales business. Many never become car dealers, however, but quickly sell their permits to established retailers for ready cash instead. Rafidah is suspected of using APs to channel patronage to UMNO supporters. Mahathir, now a special advisor to the auto company Proton, complained that the issuance of too many APs (more than 67,000 in 2004) hurt Proton's competitiveness and concentrated special rights in the hands of a few wealthy individuals. To defuse criticism, Abdullah published the names of AP recipients just days before the UMNO General Assembly in late July 2005, and later released an expanded set of names in September. Both lists contain the names of many politicians and corporate allies who had received APs.⁷ The scandal now appears to have died down. Rafidah has kept her cabinet post and even earned a vote of

confidence from Abdullah after a February 2006 cabinet reshuffle. The demotions but not dismissals of several less prominent figures such as Science, Technology, and Innovation Minister Jamaluddin Jarjis (formerly the minister of domestic trade and consumer affairs) and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz (formerly the minister of entrepreneurial development) reinforce the conclusion that party loyalists with a history of corruption have retained influential posts.

The continuity of Malaysian politics under Abdullah also extends to family connections in UMNO. Najib Abdul Razak, the current deputy prime minister and defense minister, is the son of Abdul Razak Hussein. Barring any challenges, he will step up to the premiership when Abdullah retires. Hishammuddin Hussein, the current education minister and head of UMNO's influential youth wing, is the son of Hussein Onn and grandson of UMNO's founder Onn Jaafar. Hishammuddin became the head of UMNO Youth after the dismissal of Anwar's ally Ahmad Zahid Hamidi in 1999, and steadfastly defended Mahathir throughout the BN's bitter reelection fight. He is widely considered a future contender for the number-two spot in UMNO, especially since being named education minister, a job that every premier-in-waiting since 1969 has held.

Both Najib and Hishammuddin have reputations as strongly pro-Malay politicians, each with more radical views than Abdullah's on the subject of Malay political and social hegemony. Hishammuddin caused concern among non-Malays when during the 2005 UMNO General Assembly he brandished a *keris*, a Malay ceremonial dagger, during a speech defending *ketuanan Melayu*. Another rising star in UMNO is 31-year-old Khairy Jamaluddin. The number two in UMNO's youth wing and Abdullah's son-in-law, Khairy is widely considered the man behind the scenes in Abdullah's administration. Khairy's personal fortune has mushroomed since Abdullah became premier, but depends critically on privileged government access.⁸

Abdullah himself, while notably more measured than Mahathir, has continued many of the practices that were hallmarks of Mahathir's personalization of authority. Like his predecessor, Abdullah holds the Internal Security and Finance portfolios himself. In the latter capacity he stands as final arbiter of budgetary and financial policies, giving him wide leeway to give or deny subsidies and other financial incentives to supporters and challengers. Mahathir created the superconstitutional National Economic Action Council (NEAC) to help weather the Asian financial crisis, but this body still exists even after almost a decade of economic recovery, with Abdullah at its helm. As security minister, Abdullah has ultimate authority over the Royal Malaysian Police, and may order the detention of any citizen without trial under the ISA.

Among Abdullah's first acts was his March 2004 creation of a home-affairs ministry separate from the Ministry of Internal Security—previ-

ously, the responsibilities of both had fallen to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Rela is now under Home Affairs rather than Internal Security. Despite this reassuring administrative move, however, Rela has become involved in several recent scandals, and Abdullah has already replaced his first home-affairs minister.⁹ Far less reassuring has been Abdullah's steadfast refusal to create any independent body to oversee the Royal Malaysian Police. In 2004, he did name a royal commission on police affairs that recommended, among other things, the creation of an independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission. But Abdullah backed down before strong opposition from Police Inspector-General Mohd Bakri Omar. Much to the dismay of some civil society organizations, key reforms now languish unimplemented.¹⁰ In just the past year, the police have been involved in scandals for humiliating detainees, and have severely beaten demonstrators protesting against fuel and electricity price hikes.¹¹

Such quasi-governmental watchdog bodies as do exist have only limited leverage over UMNO powerholders. Formed under Mahathir's rule, these bodies have received no additional institutional support from Abdullah, despite his campaign to develop transparent and accountable political institutions. The Electoral Commission, for instance, falls under the prime minister's department. Although the Commission's stated purpose is to ensure fair elections, it has routinely failed to investigate successfully charges of electoral misconduct by BN politicians. The ACA occasionally investigates allegations of corruption or the misuse of political authority, but convictions are rare. Even then, those found guilty are typically marginal players, and their sentences are too light to deter others. Suhakam, the official human rights commission, is staffed at the prime minister's discretion. Suhakam regularly calls for the repeal of the ISA, but to no avail.

A Regime of Discrimination

If Malaysian politics under Abdullah has featured the same strong players and weak institutions as before, economic and social policies have changed little as well. The basics of pro-*bumiputra* economic management remain firmly in place. In March 2006, the government released the Ninth Malaysia Plan, the first five-year development plan of the Abdullah era. The themes and specifics are remarkably similar to those found in the previous two plans, each of which was issued under Mahathir. These policies include measures to nurture a Bumiputra Commercial and Industrial Community; to redistribute corporate equity in favor of *bumiputras* such that they own 30 percent by 2020 (they owned 18.9 percent as of 2004); and to erase the gap in average incomes between Malays and Chinese and Indian Malaysians, whose average 2004 household incomes exceeded those of *bumiputras* by factors of 1.64 and 1.27

to 1, respectively. In particular, the Plan reiterates the regime's longstanding "Malays first" dictum that "all government agencies will be required to ensure that their policies and programmes take into account the implications on distribution."¹²

The Ninth Malaysia Plan shows how greatly ethnic redistributionism still shapes the regime's economic policies. Under Abdullah, universities still openly favor *bumiputras* for admission, and *bumiputra* secondary-school graduates find it much easier to earn scholarships for foreign and domestic study than their non-*bumiputra* classmates. A state-run investment company manages four national unit trusts in which only *bumiputras* may invest, and has plans to start another to increase *bumiputra* property ownership. The government-linked trading firm Perbadanan Nasional Berhad has set its sights on acquiring franchises for distribution to *bumiputra* businesspeople. Moreover, a government subsidiary tasked with creating *bumiputra* entrepreneurs will continue to invest public funds in *bumiputra*-owned startups, while the many other *bumiputra* trusts under federal and state control will continue their pro-*bumiputra* investment and development policies.

Social policies particularly favor Muslim *bumiputras*, of which Malays are by far the largest group. Malaysia is an Islamic state, and it remains illegal for a Muslim to convert to another religion, although non-Muslims may convert to Islam. This has led to several recent controversial cases in which courts and police have interfered with the burial of non-Malays who had allegedly converted to Islam. More disturbing to the growing urban community of modernist Malays have been raids on nightclubs and other establishments by the Federal Territories Religious Department (Jawi), a body responsible for Islamic affairs within the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Jawi officials have "arrested" Malays for behavior considered indecent under strict interpretations of Islam. This has included Malays drinking alcohol, Malay women wearing clothing deemed too provocative, and unmarried couples sitting too close to each other at malls. Interestingly, the BN government recently limited such raids, arguing that the country needs no "morality police." The imposition of Muslim morality standards on non-Muslims drew attention in 2003 after Kuala Lumpur city officials arrested a young Chinese Malaysian couple for the "disorderly conduct" of kissing in a public park.¹³

The struggle among Malays over the proper relationship between the Malaysian state and Islam in everyday life has long roots. Abdullah has emphasized his own approach to Malaysian social and development policies, termed Islam Hadhari (Civilizational Islam). In addition to piety and faith in Allah, the ten principles of Islam Hadhari stress public morality and integrity as well as developmental objectives such as mastering science and attaining high living standards. As a philosophy of governance, Islam Hadhari offers a counterpoint to what many Malay-

sians see as the extremism of many Middle Eastern states. But again, Islam Hadhari as a governing philosophy differs little from many aspects of Mahathir's "Vision 2020" governing ideology—a program to which Abdullah has several times committed himself and his government. Indeed, Islam Hadhari echoes much of Mahathir's rhetoric, in particular his calls for the creation of a fully developed, prosperous, and ethical society that embraces science and protects the rights of all Malaysians, regardless of religion or ethnic background. And to many Malaysian Muslims at any rate, Islam Hadhari is just a slogan that is not to be taken too seriously.¹⁴

All of this suggests a pessimistic view of Malaysian public life after Mahathir. Abdullah publicly praises moderation, tolerance, and national unity in a continued quest for economic development while behind the scenes the story is one of pro-*bumiputra* discrimination, UMNO dominance, repressive legislation, corruption, and cronyism. It certainly makes sense for Abdullah to paint the regime as an exercise in moderate developmentalism while avoiding the heavyhanded tactics often associated with Mahathir. But should a serious challenge arise to confront the regime, we can expect that its repressive and coercive side will emerge again.

On the Unobservable

The caveat to this view of post-Mahathir politics is that if true change under Abdullah were in the offing, it would be nearly impossible to observe. Sudden reforms and political liberalization have occurred elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia. The history of democratization in South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia shows how previously unthinkable political developments can catch observers off guard. One place where the wheels of political opening and democratization might be quietly yet significantly turning is in what remains of Malaysia's late-1990s *reformasi* movement.

Although government restrictions weaken civil society organizations, NGOs still have a strong presence in Malaysia. Civil society organizations of note include Sisters in Islam, which promotes awareness of women's rights among Muslims and non-Muslims alike; Suaram (the Malaysian People's Voice), which agitates for Malaysian adoption of international human rights standards; Aliran, which has long championed panethnic solidarity, political reform, and various causes under the label "justice"; and the Malaysian Bar Council, which strives for judicial independence and legal reform. Anwar Ibrahim, released from prison in 2004, is still a powerful opposition figure. The domestic print media, while still almost entirely controlled by companies with explicit BN connections, has taken unprecedented steps under Abdullah to report political and business scandals even when they embarrass high officials.¹⁵

Yet while civil society flourishes, the organized political opposition lies supine and inert. Since the Barisan Alternatif broke up in 2001, it has become clear that in many ways, each opposition party has more in common with the BN than it does with other opposition parties. The

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leaders of the DAP have realized that their strategic alliance with PAS was simply unacceptable to a large share of their core ethnic-Chinese constituency, which will never vote for a party allied with PAS as long as PAS hews to its explicit goal of implementing *shari'a* (Islamic law) in Malaysia. The PAS, meanwhile, clings to this stance, which is virtually all that sets it apart from UMNO.

Rumors persist that Anwar Ibrahim will enter electoral politics again in 2008, upon the expiration of his mandatory five-year ban from politics following a release from a felony conviction. Anwar is indeed popular among many reformists, famously charismatic, and a dynamic orator. Yet he will have to wage an uphill battle against charges from the regime and its opponents alike that in his quest for political rehabilitation, he makes too many contradictory promises—trying, as many Malaysians charge, “to be all things to all people.”

The lifeline of opposition parties and civil society organizations alike is the Internet. The regime—eager to promote Malaysia as an information-technology hub—places almost no limits on the flow of news and discourse online. There are dozens of influential websites and weblogs through which observers of Malaysian politics can comment on politics and current events in a manner that is simply impossible through conventional media outlets. Opposition parties and civil society groups issue press releases online that the mainstream Malaysian media almost never covers. Notable in this regard is the online newspaper *Malaysiakini.com*, which has earned a reputation for insightful, critical political commentary and analysis. Founded in 1999 by Steven Gan, a former print journalist, *Malaysiakini* has developed a wide following of paid subscribers, registering about 50,000 hits a day. The regime’s commitment to noninterference in electronic media gives *Malaysiakini* much leeway to operate, but its authors and publishers still must tread lightly. On 20 January 2003, following the online publication of an anonymous letter that criticized UMNO’s youth wing, police seized computers from the *Malaysiakini* office. The next day, Gan faced three hours of questioning by officers who alleged that the contents of the letter violated the Sedition Act. They demanded the author’s name, which Gan refused to divulge.¹⁶

Such difficulties aside, the openness afforded to the electronic media

has in fact proved a boon to none other than Mahathir himself, who in the wake of the auto-quota scandal has turned sharply critical toward the UMNO leadership. In April 2006, the government announced that it would cease construction of a new “scenic” bridge over the Johore Strait, which separates Malaysia from Singapore and is currently spanned by a causeway. Mahathir had inaugurated the project in 1996 without asking Singaporean authorities whether they would be willing to pay the bill for “their” half of the bridge. Even as talks at last began, Malaysia started construction of its half of the bridge, leaving Abdullah a complex diplomatic tangle linked not only to the bridge itself, but also to the provision of sand, water pipelines, airspace, and customs facilities. The project’s cancellation has left Abdullah’s government with an embarrassing “bridge to nowhere” dangling from the Malay Peninsula’s southern shoreline and an angry Mahathir spoiling for a fight.

The fuming ex-premier launched his campaign with an open letter in which he attacked Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar for giving Abdullah poor advice and betraying the interests of the nation. Hamid and other UMNO leaders responded by citing Abdullah’s right to make his own decisions now that Mahathir has retired, and by arguing that the domestic media should be loyal to Abdullah and the current government.¹⁷ Mahathir has since complained that the media have refused to report all sides of this controversial issue, lambasting their close-mouthed deference to Abdullah. The irony of a former ruler who emasculated the domestic media now complaining about press censorship is striking. Mainstream Malaysian press coverage of the dispute portrayed it as controlled and respectful until early June 2006, when national dailies printed a strongly worded criticism of Abdullah by Mahathir, who now claims that he made a poor choice of a successor. Some observers from outside the regime suggest that Mahathir may encourage his nationalist allies within UMNO to challenge Abdullah in the party general assembly scheduled for November 2006.¹⁸

The opacity of high-level Malaysian politics makes it hard to say whether Mahathir can really undermine Abdullah. In public, Abdullah’s deputy and the entire UMNO establishment remain loyal. If Abdullah were to succumb to an internal challenge, who would replace him? Najib Abdul Razak and Hishammuddin Hussein both bear watching. Najib will succeed Abdullah when Abdullah retires, but if Abdullah wishes to retain his position Najib will be forced to decide whether to mount a challenge. Najib was defense as well as education minister at different times under Mahathir, and Mahathir pressured Abdullah to name Najib as his deputy in 2003. Abdullah has not suggested any desire to step down, and Khairy Jamaluddin has a large personal stake in Abdullah remaining in power, but Abdullah’s recent widowerhood might provide him with an excuse to retire when his current term ends in 2009.

If Abdullah’s footing should begin to slip, Hishammuddin could

become a threat to him and a spoiler of Najib's chances. Hishammuddin played an important role in defending Mahathir in 1999 and 2000, and Hishammuddin's dagger-waving, vociferously pro-Malay speech at the 2005 UMNO General Assembly may have endeared him even further to Mahathir and Najib.¹⁹ Were Najib to sign on Hishammuddin as his prospective deputy as part of a challenge to Abdullah, it is hard to imagine how Abdullah could fend off such a one-two punch. On the other hand, if Najib by himself should challenge Abdullah, the prime minister could well tap Hishammuddin (who is well known for his loyalty to UMNO) to replace an insurgent deputy premier, in which case it would be hard to see how Najib could win the power struggle. At any rate, such a winner-takes-all face-off—pitting Abdullah and Hishammuddin against Najib and whatever deputy he was able to recruit—would be reminiscent of the 1987 leadership split within UMNO that led a threatened Mahathir to resort to election-fixing and other illicit measures which degraded Malaysia's already less-than-perfect democracy.

Although discussions of challenges to Abdullah's rule belong to the realm of speculation, it is instructive to note that since 1971 all serious challenges to the political status quo have come from within the regime. While one or more disgruntled UMNO insiders is likely to be the catalyst, challengers will quickly look beyond the BN to opposition parties. Such a kingmaking opportunity will be the juncture at which the parties, along with NGOs and civil society, can have their greatest impact. This is also the type of situation wherein Anwar Ibrahim may prove a useful ally to his former UMNO colleagues. Unfortunately, this also means that Malaysia's opposition must wait on a split within the regime and resulting entreaties from BN members. For now, these seem unlikely to be forthcoming. So long as it stays cohesive, the regime bids fair to stay in place. Without true institutional reform, Malaysians must always fear that while repression and coercion may abate in the short term, they lie perennially ready to hand as the last arguments of threatened powerholders intent on saving an authoritarian status quo.

NOTES

1. Francis Loh Kok Wah and Johan Saravanamuttu, eds., *New Politics in Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003); see also Shamsul A.B. "The Redefinition of Politics and the Transformation of Malaysian Pluralism," in Robert W. Hefner, ed., *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 204–26.

2. Anil Netto, "Phantom Voters Deny PAS Victory," *Aliran Monthly*, April 1992, 37–40.

3. See Edmund Terence Gomez, *Political Business: Corporate Involvement of Malaysian Political Parties* (Townsville, Australia: James Cook University of North Queensland, 1994); and Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo K.S., *Malaysia's Po-*

litical Economy: Politics, Patronage, and Profits (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

4. See Gordon P. Means, "Soft Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (October 1996): 103–17; and William Case, "Malaysia's Resilient Pseudodemocracy," *Journal of Democracy* 12 (January 2001): 43–57.

5. Lim Kit Siang, *Skandal \$62 Bilion Lebuhraya Utara-Selatan* (The \$62 Billion North-South Highway Scandal) (Petaling Jaya: Democratic Action Party, 1987); and Anil Netto, "The Maika-Telekom Shares Investigation: Unanswered Questions," *Aliran Monthly*, October 1993.

6. "Controversies and drama," *New Straits Times* (Singapore), 31 December 2004; and "215 projects with problems," *New Straits Times*, 10 May 2005.

7. "APs cornered by handful of companies," *New Straits Times*, 6 July 2005; "Much ado about nothing, Rafidah tells Cabinet," *New Straits Times*, 10 August 2005; and "MPs, senators with APs named," *New Straits Times*, 21 September 2005.

8. See <http://malaysia-today.net/reports/2006/06/khairy-chronicles-archives.htm>.

9. "Stern reminder to Rela members," *The Star* (Kuala Lumpur), 20 February 2006; and "Reins tightened on Rela raids," *New Straits Times*, 18 March 2006.

10. "Sack the 'defiant' IGP, PM told," *Malaysiakini*, 30 March 2006.

11. "The press got it wrong. Dead wrong. . . ," *New Straits Times*, 14 December 2005; and Lee Ban Chen, "Bila pasukan disiplin tidak berdisiplin. . ." (When the forces of discipline are not disciplined. . .), *Malaysiakini*, 1 June 2006.

12. *Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006–2010* (Putra Jaya: Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, 2006), 314.

13. "Mahkamah berhak tentukan isu moral" (Court has jurisdiction to try moral issues), *Berita Harian*, 7 April 2006; and "Muslim authorities oppose public kissing, hugging," *Malaysiakini*, 20 April 2006.

14. Interview with Chandra Muzaffar, former deputy president of Parti Keadilan Nasional, July 2006.

15. Interview with Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, BN MP for Johore Bahru, July 2006; and interview with Teresa Kok Suh Sim, DAP MP for Seputeh, July 2006.

16. Committee to Protect Journalists, www.cpj.org/cases03/asia_cases03/malaysia.html; Reporters Sans Frontières, www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=4787; and interview with Steven Gan, cofounder and editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini*, June 2006.

17. Mahathir Mohamad, "Fakta mengenai jambatan bengkok" (The facts about the crooked bridge), reprinted in *The Star*, 19 April 2006; and "Najib: Be responsible," *The Star*, 26 April 2006.

18. "Mahathir's attacks fuel talk of comeback," *Straits Times*, 26 April 2006; Steven Gan, "Dr M vs Pak Lah—The tussle is on," *Malaysiakini*, 28 April 2006; and "Dr M hits out again: There won't be a confrontation," *New Straits Times*, 8 June 2006.

19. Edmund Terence Gomez, "Malaysia: The perils of pro-Malay policies," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 September 2005.