

The right choice to make Malaysia greater

By **DATUK SERI NAJIB RAZAK**

May 9, 2018 @ 12:05pm

MY fellow Malaysians, today we will cast our votes in our country's 14th General Election. We should be proud of our strong democratic tradition that goes back further and stronger than anywhere in our region. The right to choose your government is the bedrock of our democracy and Barisan Nasional will always protect that right.

But, I am sad that this election has been fought under unfortunate circumstances.

Since the last election in 2013, the opposition have gone to extraordinary lengths to topple the democratically-elected government in between election cycles, ignoring the will of the people as expressed through the ballot box, and not allowing us to govern peacefully during our mandated term. If the opposition resort to undemocratic means to acquire power, they will never rule democratically.

Furthermore, to make an informed choice at this election, voters must know the truth. And, the DAP-led opposition have done everything they can to obscure the truth with a tsunami of fitnah(slander). Their lies have become so outrageous that even the Western media are beginning to wake up to this. Indeed, one international publication wrote this week that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speeches "contain little policy substance but maximum slander". That is an extraordinary condemnation that he cannot refute — because, it is true.

It has been my privilege to serve you as Malaysia's prime minister since 2009, and I am proud of what we have achieved together.

The 2.7 million jobs. The average growth of 5.4 per cent since 2010, which the world's advanced economies could only wish for. The Gross National Income up by over 50 per cent, which represents a huge increase in the national wealth, and explains why the International Monetary Fund commends us for being well on the way to high income status.

These are the achievements of all Malaysians, and do not let anyone tell you otherwise. Do not let the opposition rubbish those achievements by saying they do not exist, or wildly claiming that the country is on the verge of going bankrupt. They criticise for the sake of criticising but offer nothing of substance in return. Worse, they make false promises they know they cannot fulfil. For example, they claim that they would remove the Goods and Services Tax but, have yet to propose how they would replace the RM43 billion it brought in last year.

Introducing GST was one of the hardest decisions I have made. I knew that it would lead to some increases in the prices of some goods and services, and that it would be painful for some Malaysians. But, I also knew that without GST, our economy would continue to be overly reliant on the price of oil. This is something that was out of our hands and any downturn in the oil price, as we experienced a few years ago, could without intervention have led to a serious recession that would hit the people hard. GST, however, made us fiscally independent and stable. And while there may be some short-term pain, I assure you that the rewards will be long-term and felt in the years to come.

For those Malaysians who are struggling to get by, we have introduced a huge range of programmes to help the Bottom 40 and others deserving of our help. The best known is BR1M — which opposition politicians cruelly wanted to take away — but there are countless other measures we have taken to help young people get training, micro entrepreneurs get credit, and all kinds of assistance for women, rural communities and many others. You do not hear a lot about some of these programmes, and the opposition will never mention them. But, the people know the efforts BN and my government has been making on their behalf.

As the son of Tun Razak, how could I do any different? He did more than anyone to uplift the Malays, the rural communities and the poor. He instilled in me that we must always fight for all Malaysians, and that we can never let any of our countrymen be left behind in our journey to national development.

The Felda settlers know how much Tun Razak did for them and how much they meant to him. BN and I are proud to serve them humbly to this day.

Yet, we have much more to do, and we have not always gotten everything right. But, we learn from our mistakes so that we can do better for the people in the future. We are honest about that, and our track record is there for all to see. You can believe our promises for the future, such as increasing the minimum wage to RM1,500 and creating three million new jobs, because we have delivered on our promises in the past.

However, where we offer sincerity and delivery, the opposition offer populist promises they cannot deliver on, and often outright lies.

DAP is the largest party in the opposition with the vast majority of parliamentary seats, and therefore is their real power. But, they deceive the people by deliberately camouflaging their leaders behind Malays. Will they allow Dr Mahathir to become prime minister if they win? Every time he is asked, he says he would need more time in office. Now, it is up to three years. Dare they risk a 92-year-old man who jailed so many of them having the levers of power in his hands yet again?

Do not be fooled either by the tears and ridiculous allegations of sabotage or even assassination! A former dictator, as he has called himself, does not change. He has apologised sincerely for nothing. The truth is, he is trying to use his former allies, just as they are trying to use him. Their hypocrisy is breathtaking.

Imagine the country in their hands: a group of people who have spent their entire lives attacking and demonising each other, who still cannot agree on the most basic of policies, and whose only reason for coming together is to selfishly gain power for themselves.

As Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi wisely warned on Sunday, "It is unwise to elect leaders who share the same bed, but yet, have different dreams". Pak Lah said that people of different and opposing ideologies who come together just to win power cannot be good for the country. That is exactly what the opposition is. A motley crew who can barely stop stabbing each other in the back even before the election, and who have stabbed each other in the back when they have won power at the state level before.

And, they are stabbing the Malaysian people in the back with their constant lies right now. The Malaysia they describe is an alternate reality to the harmonious vibrant country this government and the hard working Malaysian people have built together.

This is the Malaysia that is recognised by the World Bank and other international institutions in their reports. This is the Malaysia that sees our government delegations welcomed at the highest level, from Washington and London to Beijing, New Delhi and Riyadh. This is the Malaysia that makes the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques choose our country in which to establish the King Salman Centre for International Peace. The truth is that Malaysia's standing in the world is very high. But, you will not hear any of that from the opposition.

For them, black is white and white is black. They offer not hope but disaster.

Now, for instance, they are threatening to cancel the East Coast Rail Link. If they call that off, which is set to create 86,000 jobs, what will happen to the young generation in those states? The ECRL is an example of the major investments this government has fought hard to win, and if we decide to cancel it, then China will stop buying palm oil from us, which will particularly affect Felda smallholders.

The opposition scaremonger that we are selling our sovereignty to China. But, this is absolutely false. Malaysian investment into China used to be bigger than Chinese investment in Malaysia, and we have more Malaysian investments overseas than foreign direct investments in this country. So, this is a two way street. And, we have actually had more FDI from Japan than China, but they don't say we are selling our country to the Japanese! In the interests of national development, we welcome investors from around the world, including Africa, the Americas, China, the EU, India and Saudi Arabia.

This is just one example of how Pakatan Fitnah take the successes Malaysians have achieved together under BN and twist them. They tell outright lies about GST — money which goes directly to the Malaysian people in carefully targeted programmes so that it goes to those who need it most, rather than having blanket subsidies that benefit instant billionaires who scornfully scoff at the recipients of BR1M. They undermine our nation in their relentless pursuit of power. It is, as the international report I cited earlier said, slander.

We have never faced an election in which these tactics and dirty tricks have been used so blatantly and shamelessly. But, I urge Malaysians to see through these lies and recognise the real country we have been building together.

It is a country we should be very proud of. It is a country that has been built by a partnership of BN and the people. This is a partnership you know, you can rely on, which is listening to you, and which has delivered and will continue to deliver for you.

So, I ask you now not to risk all that and remember instead all that we have achieved together and what heights we can soar to in the future. I pledge that if you put your trust once again in Barisan Nasional, we will continue that work for you, in the service of the people, and we will continue to build this country together. Let us unite for a greater Malaysia.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak is Malaysia's prime minister

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/peaceful-revolution-malaysia-180511140532987.html>

A peaceful revolution in Malaysia

Democratic change has finally come to Malaysia, though paradoxically, through the intervention of a former strongman.

by Richard Javad Heydarian , May 11th, 2018.

On May 9, [Malaysia](#) shocked the world via a stunning electoral outcome that saw a nonagenarian return to power. Similar to the [Brexit](#) vote and the [2016 US presidential elections](#), most observers falsely predicted a narrow victory for the losing side.

Yet, only hours after election booths closed down, it became clear to everyone that the impossible had happened. At the age of 92, a remarkably robust and fiery Mahathir Mohamad, the former strongman of Malaysia, led an energised opposition against the formidable machinery of outgoing Prime Minister [Najib Razak](#).

With legendary conviction and swagger, Mahathir braved the sweltering summer heat, a battering campaign schedule, and endless mudslinging by his critics, who mockingly claimed he was just "too old" to run for office.

The newly minted Malaysian leader isn't, however, expected to stay in power for long. As part of a grand bargain, opposition groups adopted Mahathir as a transitional leader to shepherd the country towards a new era of democratic dynamism and clean governance.

Last century saw Mahathir build the foundations of an economically dynamic Malaysia. This century may see him paving the way for the creation of a robust democracy in [Asia](#).

The ultimate winner of the elections is long-time democracy activist and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, who is currently in jail on sodomy charges. Having just secured a [royal pardon](#), Anwar is slated to become Malaysia's prime minister for the foreseeable future.

After decades of sterile authoritarian politics, Malaysia has become, almost overnight, a beacon of democratic hope in a region troubled by right-wing populists and military regimes.

A revolt against corruption

At its very heart, the latest Malaysian elections reflected a nationwide rejection of [corruption](#) and impunity among the entrenched elite.

In many ways, the electoral outcome was tantamount to regime change, as the Mahathir-led opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan ended the six-decades-long rule of Barisan Nasional (BN), formerly the Alliance Party.

It marked the first interparty transition of power in post-independence Malaysian history. The outgoing prime minister and his associates were desperate to stay in power amid a massive corruption scandal, which could see him and his associates end up in jail.

Mr Najib and his coterie have been [accused of looting](#) as much as one billion US dollars from the state investment fund, also known as 1MDB. As a result, governments around the world, from the [United States](#) to France and Singapore, have launched investigations or frozen accounts associated with the 1MDB fund.

Yet, the Najib administration [showed little interest](#) in accountability and reform. If anything, it chose to dig in. Over the past two years, Najib mercilessly purged all critics within the government, including Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, in order to stave off any internal political coup.

In a direct assault on state institutions, the embattled leader went [so far as firing](#) the attorney general investigating the 1MDB corruption scandal.

After leaked confidential papers alleged that hundreds of millions of dollars in stolen funds ended up in his bank accounts, Najib astonishingly claimed that they [were just "gifts"](#) from the Saudi royal family.

But a majority of Malaysian people were sick and tired of painfully watching state institutions decaying under the punishing weight of widespread corruption and outright decadence among the ruling class.

Father of a nation

The upshot was a political tsunami that saw no less than Mahathir, an ultimate insider and long-time mentor of Najib, joining forces with the opposition.

For two decades, Mahathir [led with an iron-fist](#), muzzling the media, jailing rivals, including his former deputy-turned-ally Anwar, and overseeing draconian laws, which heavily marginalised ethnic minorities (ie, Chinese and Indian) and the liberal intelligentsia.

He also became a leading voice behind the [so-called "Asian values" paradigm](#), self-interestedly claiming that civil liberties and individual freedoms are alien principles that run counter to the communitarian fabric of Eastern civilisations.

But Mahathir is also credited for turning Malaysia into a manufacturing hub, with a world-class infrastructure and a booming middle class. It's precisely this commendable legacy that has won him supporters across generations.

After stepping down from power in 2003, he quickly turned from a king to a kingmaker, engineering the ascent (and later dismissal) of his two successors, Abdullah Badawi and Najib Razak.

Najib would have lost power as early as 2013, if not for heavy [gerrymandering](#), voter disenfranchisement, systematic intimidation of opposition media, and large-scale patronage of favoured and heavily rural constituencies,

Back then, the opposition, led by Anwar, won the popular vote but was heavily underrepresented in the parliament. This time, however, Mahathir managed to split the rural, Malay base of the ruling party, while rallying the more urbanised and ethnically diverse opposition groups under his charismatic leadership.

The road ahead, however, is challenging. Mahathir has promised to retrieve stolen funds from the state coffers, hold corrupt officials to account, and even review the country's major infrastructure deals with China, which heavily invested in Malaysia during Najib's reign.

Moving forward, he will have to reform state agencies, including the judiciary and internal security services, which are still populated by holdovers from the previous regime. Otherwise, any anti-corruption initiative will likely provoke a backlash from within the state apparatus.

Overhauling Malaysia's heavily damaged democratic institutions, however, will be a long-term project that will fall under the responsibility of Mahathir's successor, Anwar, and the country's new generation of progressive, young leaders.

For now, boundless hope is in the air. Democratic change has finally come to the Southeast Asian country, though, quite paradoxically, through the intervention of a former strongman.

Decades from now, Malaysia's 14th general elections will likely be remembered as a peaceful revolution, which altered the Southeast Asian nation's history.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

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<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1101730.shtml>

Mahathir win unlikely to reverse China-Malaysia ties

By Bai Tiantian and Chen Qingqing Source:Global Times Published: 2018/5/10

China, Malaysia should cherish ties: FM

Chinese analysts expressed cautious optimism over China-Malaysia relations after an opposition coalition led by Malaysia's political strongman Mahathir Mohamad won the majority of seats in national elections.

The 92-year-old former Malaysian prime minister said Malaysia may renegotiate some deals with China after his coalition won against the government of Najib Razak, who is credited with building warm ties with China.

Mahathir previously criticized Chinese investments in Malaysia, calling some agreements signed or endorsed by Najib lopsided. But analysts said friendly China-Malaysia relations are unlikely to be reversed.

"I don't think it is correct to call Mahathir 'anti-China' as some have in the media. When he was prime minister, he was friendly with China and visited China several times. At that time, Mahathir was a fervent critic of the US," Zhu Zhenming, a professor at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, told the Global Times.

Zhu said some of Mahathir's criticism of Chinese investments may have been politically driven in an attempt to defeat Najib in the election.

"China's trade volume is too large to be ignored. Cooperating with China is not an option but a mutually beneficial trend that cannot be reversed," Zhu noted.

Mahathir, who led Malaysia for 22 years before retiring at 78, told a news conference on Thursday that he supports China's **Belt and Road** initiative but said Malaysia reserves the right to renegotiate terms of some agreements with Beijing, if necessary.

Mahathir's criticism toward Chinese investments has sparked concerns among some Chinese investors.

Li Minglong, a businessman from Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region who imports bird's nest from Malaysia, told the Global Times he fears that the election results might impact his business in the short term.

A businesswoman, Wu Wanrong, said she waited until midnight for the election results.

Wu's business with Malaysia will continue but she hopes that her import papers won't be postponed with a new administration in office.

Regional sentiment

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said on Thursday that Mahathir is a veteran politician who has made important contributions to the development of China-Malaysia relations.

"The current comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Malaysia enjoys a sound momentum and the cooperation is generating fruitful results. This has brought concrete benefits to the two nations and peoples and both sides should cherish it," Geng told the media.

Analysts noted that Mahathir may diversify foreign investments in Malaysia and make Malaysia less dependent on China economically after taking office.

"Elections aside, Mahathir's comments reflect some of his concerns that are not uncommon in Southeast Asia. Many of these countries are still adapting to China's rise," Zhu said.

Mahathir's victory may postpone a high-speed rail project between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

In a previous interview with The Sunday Times, Mahathir said: "We need to do a study on whether it is feasible or not because we don't have the money and have to borrow, and that is not something the Malaysian government can bear at the moment. We have to know whether we really need this HSR or not."

Analysts also said a \$13 billion East Coast Rail Link that will connect Malaysia's underdeveloped east coast to Kuala Lumpur, which Mahathir had campaigned against, could be shelved.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-election-china/selling-the-country-to-china-debate-spills-into-malaysias-election-idUSKBN1HY076>

Selling the country to China? Debate spills into Malaysia's election

APRIL 26, 2018 By: Liz Lee

KUANTAN, Malaysia (Reuters) - When Malaysia's political parties unfurled their election flags and banners this month, Prime Minister Najib Razak's critics sniggered on social media that the manufacturer named on banners of his ruling coalition was Chinese.

Mahathir Mohamad, who heads an alliance hoping to oust Najib, has seized on popular disquiet about Chinese investment pouring into Malaysia and turned it into an election issue.

Najib, he says, is selling Malaysia out to China.

This could matter for Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and for Malaysia's economy because Mahathir, who was the country's prime minister for more than two decades, has vowed to reconsider Chinese contracts if the opposition wins on May 9.

"Coming in here, buying land, developing luxurious towns, is not beneficial for us," the 92-year-old former leader said of China's investments in a recent interview with Reuters. "Quite definitely, we will review."

Najib has repeatedly shrugged off Mahathir's barbs on China, saying that allowing foreign direct investment does not amount to selling the country's sovereignty.

A senior leader in the ruling coalition, commenting on the banners made in China, said: "The opposition are doing the same thing ... because simply it is cheap and efficient."

A Nomura report this month on the Belt and Road initiative showed that Malaysia is one of the largest beneficiaries of Chinese investment commitments in Asia, securing \$34.2 billion of BRI-related infrastructure projects.

There have been concerns in some BRI host countries, such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan, about rising debts levels, over-reliance on China and the environmental impact of mega-projects. Critics also say some projects give China access to strategic locations and trade corridors that could hurt the sovereignty of nations.

Objections to Chinese investments in Malaysia, however, have focused on the presence of thousands of Chinese workers, heavy dependence on Chinese materials, and limited opportunities for local companies.

For instance, the \$100 billion township project by Chinese developer Country Garden (2007.HK) in the Iskandar Malaysia special economic zone of Johor state, has ruffled feathers in a bastion of support for Najib's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

Johor locals complain that large numbers of Chinese people have been allowed to own properties in the project, which is called Forest City. Last year, Chinese nationals accounted for about 70 percent of apartment buyers there.

Other grievances over Forest City have included environmental damage, a property market glut, and the impact of land reclamation on the local fishing industry.

“CHINESE TSUNAMI”

Najib’s Barisan Nasional (BN) alliance, dominated by UMNO, is widely expected to defeat Mahathir’s Pakatan Harapan coalition in the election, but will most likely be relying on the country’s majority Malays to do so.

Malaysia’s own economically powerful ethnic Chinese voted heavily for the opposition at the last election in 2013, handing the UMNO-led coalition its first-ever loss of the popular vote. Najib called it a “Chinese tsunami”.

This time, Najib needs to win comfortably to avoid a leadership challenge and, to do that, he will need to reassure voters angry over the cost of living and corruption as well as fend off opposition attacks over Chinese investments.

“Please do not support and believe in what they are saying,” Najib said at a community event in Kuala Lumpur this week. “If you do, this would only hurt our economy.”

Ties between Malaysia and China have flourished under Najib, who visited Beijing in both 2016 and 2017.

The prime minister is under a cloud over a long-running scandal at state fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) but Chinese state-linked firms have purchased power assets and real estate linked to 1MDB, helping resolve some of its debt issues.

Najib has consistently denied any wrongdoing over billions of dollars that went missing from 1MDB but at least six countries, including the United States, are investigating transactions related to the fund.

In Kuantan, a laid-back coastal town with tropical beaches, China’s shadow is looming large.

Chinese firms are leading the construction of a 3,000-acre industrial park, which is rising out of sight behind what locals call a “Great Wall”, and they have taken a 40-percent stake in the operator of a deep water, multi-cargo port nearby.

Meanwhile, China Communications Construction Co Ltd ([601800.SS](#)) is building a 55 billion ringgit (\$14 billion) rail line that will link Malaysia’s east coast on the South China Sea to Kuala Lumpur and the strategic shipping routes of the Strait of Malacca in the west.

LEFT OUT

But local entrepreneurs feel left out of the bonanza.

“To me, the China investments here look fishy and don’t seem to benefit the locals as we hoped for,” said Syed Heider, a Kuantan-based building materials supplier who recently switched allegiance from Najib’s BN to the opposition. “Of 10 people that I know, eight people have already swung to Pakatan.”

At a recent groundbreaking ceremony in Kelantan state, the northern end of the rail line, Najib said Malaysia would have been “stupid” not to work with China because it offered a loan for 85 percent of the project value with a grace period of seven years.

Stressing the development potential for one of the country’s less developed states, he said the link would create 80,000 jobs and the project operator would be obliged to give at least 70 percent of these to local workers.

Noting that less than 20 percent of the east coast line’s workers are Chinese, Minister of International Trade and Industry Mustapa Mohamed told Reuters that China and Malaysia are trying to avoid a repeat of Forest City’s tensions.

“In hindsight, the Forest City experience taught them some lessons, and us as well ... policymakers have learnt quite a bit from this and now the Chinese understand the importance of respecting local practices,” he said.

(\$1 = 3.9190 ringgit)

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/05/10/malaysians-usher-in-a-new-era-as-they-usher-out-the-ruling-coalition/?utm_term=.2feb4a9cbe92

Malaysians usher in a new era as they usher out the ruling coalition

By King Chai Woon and Vincent Bevins May 10 at 12:38 PM

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Malaysians woke up Thursday to an unexpected new world of possibilities. Despite [manipulating the electoral process](#), attempting to muzzle critics with a “fake news” law and stoking racial and religious divisions, Prime Minister Najib Razak lost Wednesday’s election, as Malaysian voters ousted the ruling coalition for the first since time since the country’s independence from Britain.

The new prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, is no radical political outsider. The 92-year-old ran the country from 1981 to 2003, was often accused of limiting Malaysian democracy and joined the opposition coalition — Pakatan Harapan, or Alliance of Hope — only last year.

His supporters hope Mahathir’s government will be less autocratic than Najib’s and less reliant on sectarian appeals to Malay Muslim identity. But even if it doesn’t turn out that way, most analysts and citizens agree that something important happened Wednesday. Voters proved, for the first time, that they can make a difference by showing up, and that democracy is still alive and kicking in Asia.

“I’m very happy with this result. But I’m also a bit scared,” said Shariza Binti Zolkeple, a 25-year-old Muslim Malay fashion designer waiting for Mahathir to be sworn in Thursday. “After six decades with the Barisan Nasional [National Front] in power, many people will be unhappy, and we don’t know what will happen.”

The surprising result is rare good news for supporters of liberal democracy elsewhere around Southeast Asia, a region that [has mostly been lurching toward autocracy, violence and religious fundamentalism](#) in recent years. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has overseen a “war on drugs” that has taken thousands of lives, as well as a press crackdown. Indonesia, Southeast Asia’s largest country, has [taken steps toward](#) Islamic conservatism, and Burma (also known as Myanmar) has been host to an explosion of anti-Muslim violence.

“This shows that the pendulum can swing back from authoritarianism,” said Bridget Welsh, a professor of political science and Malaysia specialist at John Cabot University in Italy. “Corruption scandals and Najib’s ostentatious wealth flew in the face of ordinary people struggling to make ends meet — and unlike in the last election, they had somewhere else to go, a former premier who while not uncontroversial is known by the public.”

Even the less-than-level playing field during the campaign couldn’t stop them. “All the cheating was overpowered by a tsunami of voters,” she said.

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy modeled on the British parliamentary system, with the throne rotated among nine royal families from the ethnic Malay population, who are constitutionally defined as Muslims and make up about 60 percent of the country.

Late on Thursday, Sultan Muhammad V swore in Mahathir after hours of delay that led to speculation that Najib might be mounting a last-ditch effort to hold on to power. Mahathir says he does not want to govern for long and will work to pardon former deputy Anwar Ibrahim, who beat Najib in the popular vote in 2013 but failed to win enough of the parliamentary positions that matter in the Malaysian system, and then was jailed on sodomy charges he calls politically motivated. The Alliance of Hope won far more than the 112 seats needed to form a majority Wednesday, and if all goes according to plan, Anwar could take power within a year or two and emphasize social justice and anti-corruption.

In Mahathir’s campaign, he promised to restore national pride and said that the world has been calling Najib a “crook,” a blow that lands especially hard due to accusations of [large-scale malfeasance](#) at the 1MDB state investment fund, which is being investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice and authorities in at least five other countries. Najib largely responded to these challenges by cracking down on free expression and jumping on the electoral scales to try to tip them in his favor.

Although Malaysia was never a bastion of free speech, Najib’s government passed a controversial “fake news” law this year that was widely seen as a way to limit criticism before campaigning started. Perhaps predictably, Mahathir was soon targeted by the law. Malaysia’s electoral commission also redrew the country’s districts in an aggressive gerrymandering exercise that clearly benefited Najib, and the government even temporarily dissolved Mahathir’s party in April.

On top of all that, Najib, who briefly supported a criminal code based on Islamic sharia law, also played the race card. In addition to the Malay majority, the country is home to large ethnic Chinese and Tamil-speaking minority populations, who are mostly non-Muslim and therefore exempt from religious law. As the Alliance of Hope includes the Chinese-majority Democratic Action Party (DAP), Najib warned that the country could be dominated by the Chinese.

In Southeast Asia, ethnic Chinese minorities have been subjected to official political exclusion or even racial violence when leaders accuse them of being rich outsiders with undue influence. The DAP has never taken part in a national government.

But it couldn’t sway the voters for Najib. On Friday, Malaysians will wake up for the first time with the National Front out of power and with the knowledge that they can vote out this new group of leaders, too, if they don’t like the way things go.

“The great tragedy in Malaysia is that it has one of the most sophisticated democracies in Southeast Asia but that over the years these institutions had withered on the vine due to machine politics,” said Michael Vatikiotis, the Asia regional director at the Geneva-based Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, who said that recent developments elsewhere in Asia prove that democratic success stories can easily be undone. “We must and should celebrate the triumph of these Malaysian democratic institutions, but we should not be naive about the real threats that lie ahead.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/world/asia/mahathir-malaysia-democracy-strongmen.html>

Malaysia Finds an Unlikely Champion of Democracy: Its Ex-Strongman

By **Hannah Beech** and **Richard C. Paddock** May 11, 2018

The story line is a familiar one these days: A populist strongman with a long record of racially divisive commentary prevails in the polls.

But Mahathir Mohamad, who was [sworn in as prime minister of Malaysia on Thursday](#), was not swept to power by the kind of nationalist demagoguery that has captivated electorates in places like [Hungary](#), [India](#) and the [Philippines](#).

Instead, Mr. Mahathir was at the head of a multiethnic opposition that ousted a government long dependent on stoking the fears of Malaysia's Malay Muslim majority to prolong its grip on power. That Mr. Mahathir, 92, had for decades toughened the network of race and patronage that contributed to Malaysia's political sclerosis is just one of the many surprises of the national elections on Wednesday.

"It has produced a multiracial — not Malay or Chinese — tsunami of protest against the corruption, economic mismanagement and abuse of political power," said Lim Teck Ghee, a public policy analyst and author of the book "Challenging the Status Quo in Malaysia." "It has avoided racial and religious rancor and acrimony, which would have left a contentious and dangerous aftermath."

Few people expected Mr. Mahathir's opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan — an unwieldy collection of reformists, nationalists, Islamists, ethnic minorities and former enemies of Mr. Mahathir — to hold together, much less shatter an entrenched political system that has held sway in Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957.

But Mr. Mahathir, who now ranks as the world's oldest serving prime minister, has long been adept at staging unlikely political plot twists. [And the voter outrage that fueled his comeback](#) is a burst of hope in Southeast Asia, where democracy has ebbed in the face of populist autocrats.

"After independence, this is probably the most important occasion in our political history," said Wan Saiful Wan Jan, a longtime political analyst who ran unsuccessfully for Parliament in this election. "It paves the way for political competition."

Although people-power revolutions late in the last century resulted in the overthrow of dictators like Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and Suharto of Indonesia, strongman rule has returned in force to Southeast Asia.

President Rodrigo Duterte has kick-started a drug war in the Philippines that has killed thousands, while Prime Minister Hun Sen has systematically destroyed even the semblance of a political opposition in Cambodia. Thailand has reverted to military rule, with elections repeatedly postponed. Generals in Myanmar continue to call the shots as they have unleashed a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Brunei remains an isolated sultanate.

At one time, Mr. Mahathir might have been more suited to the hall of infamy that included Asia's despots and junta chiefs. During his years as prime minister from 1981 to 2003, Mr. Mahathir muzzled the media, jailed his opponents on what were seen as trumped-up charges and turned a blind eye as leaders of the governing National Front coalition personally profited from their political positions. His virulent Malay nationalism alienated Malaysia's sizable Chinese and Indian minorities.

In this week's elections, Mr. Mahathir delivered Malaysia's first post-ethnic vote, attracting Malaysians of all backgrounds to the opposition. "We've talked so long about different categories of Malaysians, all these boxes of people," said Fahmi Fadzil, who won a parliamentary seat for the opposition People's Justice Party despite extensive government gerrymandering in his district. "This election is about uniting us, not dividing us."

Even some of his fiercest enemies have come to see Mr. Mahathir in a different light.

"I trust him today because at this time and age, he is more interested in leaving the right legacy for Malaysians and to set his record right in the history books," said Tony Pua, an opposition member of Parliament who was re-elected Wednesday with a record number of votes. "If wealth and power were his ambitions, there are much easier routes he could have taken."

Still, Mr. Mahathir is an unlikely avatar of democracy, particularly one in which diversity is championed.

More than anything, what bound Pakatan Harapan, Mr. Mahathir's coalition, was revulsion for Mr. Najib, who has been tainted by accusations of immense greed and graft during his nine years as prime minister.

Mr. Najib, once Mr. Mahathir's protégé, stands accused of diverting \$731 million from a state investment fund he controlled into his own bank accounts. His own government had cleared him of any wrongdoing. But Mr. Mahathir said after the vote that Mr. Najib would have to face the consequences.

"Our intention is to go for people who have shown a tendency to be corrupt," Mr. Mahathir said Friday.

During his earlier stint as prime minister, Mr. Mahathir perpetuated an affirmative action scheme for Malays that was designed to erase the long years of discrimination under British colonial rule. The policy gave "sons of the soil," as Malays and indigenous people are known, preferential treatment in education and employment. Most civil service jobs went to Malays.

But as Malaysia developed into a middle-income country, members of the Chinese and Indian communities wondered why so much of the economy was reserved for Malays. Others worried that affirmative action was making Malays complacent and unable to compete in a free market. A brain drain of talented Chinese and Indians robbed the country of some of its best talent.

Mr. Mahathir's enduring charisma and rapier speech energized the opposition, all the more so given his advanced age. During the campaign, he avoided the language of Malay superiority. At news conferences, he joked with reporters and teased opposition figures who had been political prisoners under his tenure.

Yet his decades of intolerant sentiments have left some wary.

"Where some see sharp wit, I see red flags that the old Mahathir is still recognizable under it all," said Lainie Yeoh, a marketing director in Kuala Lumpur, the capital.

Perhaps the most significant measure of the new Mahathir is [his announcement Friday that Malaysia's king, Sultan Muhammad V, will pardon the former opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim](#), who is serving a prison sentence for sodomy that many saw as politically motivated. A pardon could set the stage for Mr. Anwar to succeed Mr. Mahathir as prime minister.

"Malaysians have gone through such a painful time," said Mr. Anwar's daughter Nurul Izzah Anwar, who was re-elected to Parliament. "Anwar Ibrahim has gone through so much. Now we need to show that we will reject the divisiveness of the past and embrace inclusiveness for all Malaysians."

"We're supposed to be a democracy. Let's act that way."

Austin Ramzy and Sharon Tan contributed reporting.