

---

## The winds of change

Posted by Zia - 2008/05/04 04:32

---

Could the opposition take power after 51 years?

AS MALAYSIA'S new parliament opened this week, a mood of change was in the air not felt since the country's independence from Britain in 1957. The governing coalition, led since then by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), is panicking after suffering its poorest-ever showing in the general election held in March. The knives are out for Abdullah Badawi, the prime minister. The opposition, newly assertive and, so far, united behind its leader, Anwar Ibrahim, claims that at least 30 MPs from the ruling coalition are preparing to defect, which would be enough for it to take power. A change of government in Malaysia—a fanciful notion until recently—now seems a real possibility.

To fend off calls for his resignation Mr Badawi has said that after UMNO's annual conference, which has been postponed until December, he will discuss handing the party leadership (and thus the prime ministership) to his deputy, Najib Razak. Not soon enough, say his internal critics, including Mahathir Mohamad, the prime minister's embittered predecessor, and Razaleigh Hamzah, a former finance minister and rival to Dr Mahathir, who intends to run for the leadership. Mr Badawi has pleaded with local party branches to stop calling emergency meetings to discuss the poor election result and question his leadership, so far to no avail.

In a bid to salvage his reputation, Mr Badawi has belatedly started keeping the bold promises of reform that he made on coming to office in 2003. Foremost among these was curbing corruption within the government. But the public thinks it has actually worsened under his administration. Last year, grave allegations against the then head of the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) and the national police chief were dismissed by the attorney-general's office for "lack of evidence". The prime minister announced this month that the ACA, widely seen as subservient to the politicians it is supposed to supervise, would be replaced by a more independent body. Opposition leaders are pressing him to create an independent police-complaints body, a promise Mr Badawi had broken after meeting stiff resistance from police chiefs.

Another of Mr Badawi's pledges, unkept until now, was to reform the country's weak and mistrusted judiciary. The justice system was wrecked by Dr Mahathir in 1988, after the courts ordered UMNO's dissolution. Dr Mahathir had the constitution changed to strip the courts of their independence from government. He also sacked the head of the Supreme Court and five other senior judges. Last year the opposition highlighted the need for judicial reforms by releasing a video-clip of a top lawyer apparently boasting of his ability to fix judicial appointments. In his cabinet shuffle after the election Mr Badawi appointed a prominent legal reformer, Zaid Ibrahim, to shake up the justice system. Last month the prime minister announced that the changes would include a new, independent commission to recommend candidates for the judiciary. The six judges sacked in 1988 will be given compensation but no apology.

Other better-late-than-never measures from Mr Badawi include loosening the state's tight grip on the press. Mr Anwar's People's Justice Party is to be allowed to publish its own newspaper, a right it has been seeking for ten years. The government has also revoked its ban on Makkal Osai, a paper read by the country's ethnic-Indian minority, which had given ample coverage to the opposition's election campaign and to Hindraf, a radical protest group campaigning for the Indian minority's rights, which the government has accused of terrorist links. The government is also reconsidering some of its lavish public-works projects, which have a tendency to be awarded to UMNO-friendly firms. A high-speed "bullet" train link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, costing 10 billion Malaysian ringgit (\$3.2 billion), was the first to come under review.

Welcome as they are, these moves seem unlikely to save Mr Badawi. Mr Anwar crows that his opposition coalition, the People's Alliance, will be in government by September. He says he is simply waiting until he has enough potential defections from the government benches to secure a comfortable majority before making his move. There have been a few defections at state level but, so far, no MPs have jumped. Mr Anwar has been courting support in the Malaysian part of Borneo, hoping that some of the gaggle of pro-government parties there—on which the ruling coalition now depends for its majority—might defect en masse.

Mr Anwar has been prime minister in waiting before. He was deputy to Dr Mahathir until 1998 but the two men fell out and the then prime minister had him jailed on dubious charges. A ban on Mr Anwar's taking political office expired last month. Rebranded as an anti-UMNO reformer, he can now stand for parliament again. His chances of success in his second shot at power hinge not just on whether he can attract enough government MPs—ideally principled ones, not just those available to the highest bidder—but on whether his opposition coalition, an uneasy mix of secularists, Islamists and ethnic-Chinese activists can hold together.

=====