



Malaysia

Government to come under greater pressure to lift emergency decree; political instability to persist

 OPERATIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONAL POLITICAL STABILITY

COVID-19

Former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad (2018-20) on 15 February claimed that the incumbent Muhyiddin Yassin was not qualified to be the prime minister as he had lost majority support.

The country's declining COVID-19 infection rate is likely to increase opposition pressure on the government to lift the state of emergency before its expiry on 1 August.

Nevertheless, Muhyiddin has the potential to influence the king to maintain the state of emergency until May, which is when the health ministry expects to bring COVID-19 under control.

The lifting of the emergency decree is likely to trigger a snap general election; the opposition has the potential to oust the ruling coalition due to the latter's divided state.

A new government is likely to pose risks to policy continuity and may not resolve chronic political instability, particularly if it only has a slim parliamentary majority.

Shaky majority

Malaysia on 15 February recorded 2,176 new COVID-19 cases, which was the fewest daily new cases recorded since early January. The declining infection rate is likely to prompt further opposition pressure on the government to advise the king to lift the [emergency decree](#), which was implemented in mid-January to empower authorities to take stronger measures to curb COVID-19. Opposition politicians and civil society activists have criticised Muhyiddin for abusing the emergency decree to retain political power, particularly after he lost majority support in parliament early this year. There are only 109 out of 222 lawmakers in the Dewan Rakyat (lower house of parliament) who still support Muhyiddin, which is less than the 111 lawmakers needed for a simple majority.

Committee games

The opposition is likely to focus its lobbying efforts on the 19-member Special Independent Emergency Committee 2021 (SIEC). This will advise the king on when it would be feasible to lift the state of emergency. The committee has four ruling coalition lawmakers and three opposition lawmakers, which was likely engineered to ensure that the ruling coalition would have greater influence than the opposition lawmakers who are clearly against the emergency decree.

The identities of the ruling coalition lawmakers also suggest that Muhyiddin would have the potential to influence the king indirectly to maintain the state of emergency for as long as possible. For instance, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO; ruling coalition member) has one of its lawmakers, Noh Omar, as a SIEC member. Although parts of UMNO want the emergency decree lifted so that they can oust Muhyiddin, Noh Omar may not be willing to support this because Muhyiddin had rewarded him with an appointment in a government-linked company in June 2020. (Noh Omar resigned shortly after, citing his desire to focus more on his constituents than running the company.)

Snap election

The king may follow the health ministry's expected timeline of bringing COVID-19 [under control](#) by May, and lift the state of emergency by then. This is likely to trigger snap polls given UMNO's [continued efforts](#) to undermine Muhyiddin.

The opposition has the potential to recapture federal power because of the potential splitting of ethnic Malay votes between UMNO and Muhyiddin's Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM; ruling coalition member). The two parties may decide against working together for the election.

A government led by the current opposition is likely to review Muhyiddin's policy initiatives and investment project decisions in ways that would affect policy continuity. The government may suffer from instability if it is unable to secure a strong parliamentary majority, which is a credible scenario given splits within the opposition camp, which remain unresolved.

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