

Foreign-backed opposition poses threat to Malaysia's stability

by Sophie Tanapura

The opposition in Malaysia has just emerged victorious in an important by-election, in what threatens to become a continuous series of electoral challenges to the government of Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, as well as to his leadership of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Dr. Mahathir has incurred the wrath of the Western financial elites for his nationalist program of industrialization, and for his no-nonsense crackdown on drug traffickers.

Former UMNO parliamentarian Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, whose resignation from Parliament prompted the Aug. 25 by-election in his home district of Johore Baru, scored a 2-to-1 victory against the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition's candidate and UMNO loyalist Haji Mas'ud Abdul Rahman. Shahrir had made clear that his main issue was the ouster of Mahathir because of his "undemocratic" style of government.

Clearly, the deciding factor in the election was the public support Shahrir received from Malaysia's top opposition leaders, led by "the father of Malaysia," Tunku Abdul Rahman. Rahman, now 85 and quite ill, nonetheless gave public addresses denouncing the "Mahathir dictatorship" and backing Shahrir. At one campaign event, he broke down and cried, and closed with the emotional call, "Merdeka!" ("Independence!"), the battle cry of the national movement he led against the British colonialists. Rahman enjoys widespread respect and love throughout the country. As one opposition spokesman pointed out, every tear the Tunku shed publicly was worth a hundred votes to Shahrir.

Prior to the Johore Baru by-election, Tunku Abdul Rahman described Mahathir as a man attempting to become a "complete dictator" (*Time*, July 25). Also, in a two-page article written for the July 21 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the Tunku went so far as to say that under Mahathir's leadership, the reorganized UMNO party threatened to return the people to colonial status: "If [the people] allow themselves to be used as stooges by this new party, they will lose their identity as independent, free people and will revert to their old status as backward hangers-on." Such a wild statement would have no credibility in Malaysia itself; it was written for an international audience.

How aware is Rahman that his activities are playing into the hands of the international network of the same Project Democracy apparatus that has thrown the Philippines into permanent chaos? ALIRAN, the tiny "human rights" organ-

ization widely promoted by the international press, has been publicly supported by Rahman. Yet, in its publications, ALIRAN promotes liberation theology, Islamic fundamentalism, environmentalism, drugs, and just about any destabilizing influence one can think of.

Moreover, for the Tunku to agree to write a commentary for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, which has been the consistent spokesman for Project Democracy policies in the region, reflects at best a blindness on his part. Is he too old to know what he is doing, or is he willing to collaborate even with the devil to "get" Prime Minister Mahathir? That the former may be the case was implied in the Aug. 13 Indonesian daily, *Kompas*, which said that his "attacks are more emotional and less balanced."

Foreign support

The other major opposition figure, Mahathir's former trade and industry minister and would-be prime minister Tengku Razeleigh Hamzeh, was also campaigning for Shahrir. Upon his recent return from a month-long tour of the United States and Europe, he insisted to inquisitive reporters that he was not abroad raising money. However, after his return, he called for the creation of a "people's tribunal" to generate support for his movement, precisely the terminology characteristic of U.S. Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.) and the Project Democracy crowd that ran the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos. Razeleigh is opposed to Mahathir's big industrialization projects for the country.

The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition which Mahathir heads is the only institution in the nation representing all races and religions. The government described its election theme as the two "Ps," *Perpaduan dan Pembangunan*, Unity and Development.

At a speech given Aug. 27 to over 100,000 people at an event in Kedah, Mahathir blasted the hypocrisy of the opposition, which, despite its victory, has also accused the government of vote fraud. "These people are liars who are cheating the people for their selfish interests. They do not have the people's welfare at heart, but are bent on instilling hatred against the leaders," said Mahathir. He then compared the opposition to those Malay leaders who have collaborated with colonial powers in exchange for special favors.

Though Mahathir was not specific, it is well known that Shahrir and his backers collaborated with the Chinese-based

Democratic Action Party (DAP) to secure victory. This alliance between ex-UMNO officials and the DAP is especially unscrupulous, since the DAP has been critical of the government policy granting economic privileges to ethnic Malays who were historically suppressed by the British in favor of Chinese economic dominance. The DAP has been the main opposition to the Barisan Nasional coalition since its creation by the late Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second prime minister, even though the Barisan—which includes the UMNO, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)—has been crucial in maintaining collaboration among the various ethnic communities.

The opposition has made clear that the Johore Baru by-election is just the first to be provoked by the resignation from Parliament of ex-UMNO leaders.

Not all the opposition is enthusiastic about this destabilization approach. Long-time opposition spokesman Datuk Mohamed Sopiee, in his Aug. 28 column in *The Star*, cautioned, "We cannot afford to harm the political stability of our nation, especially when our economy is showing signs of making a promising recovery. We should not sap our energies and resources by carrying on a running political feud among ourselves." He also admitted that the manner in which all parties involved in the election conducted themselves was proof that parliamentary democracy is not dead in Malaysia, the point being emphasized by the government.

Economic growth

Sopiee's warning that political chaos would threaten the

stability of Malaysia's growing economy hit the opposition's most vulnerable spot. Under Mahathir's leadership, Malaysia has experienced impressive economic development, despite a period of slowdown due to depressed tin prices and the U.S. dollar's collapse. Furthermore, according to recent statistics from the Ministry of Trade and Industry, 336 manufacturing projects involving foreign investment have been approved in the first seven months of this year, as compared to 333 projects approved for the entirety of 1987. These projects are expected to bring in investments worth M\$4.581 billion, and create 64,247 jobs. In addition, manufacturing projects wholly owned by Malaysians are up to 124 as of July this year, compared to 44 projects approved in the same period last year. As far as Bumiputra (ethnic Malay) participation in the corporate sector is concerned, this has increased from 2% in 1970 to 18% as of 1987.

Obviously, under such conditions, the opposition has had a difficult time stirring up discontent with the government. They therefore have had to resort to tactics such as heating up grievances within the ethnic communities against alleged government discrimination. The opposition has also utilized certain sympathetic quarters within the judiciary to wage legal battles against Mahathir. Last spring, they managed to get the original UMNO declared illegal, but Mahathir quickly established a new UMNO and re-registered the old UMNO members. Now, however, their latest tactic of provoking a continuous series of by-elections which are turned into referenda on Mahathir's popularity may pose a serious threat to Malaysia's stability.

Malaysia needs common language, says Mahathir

In an Aug. 1 address reported by the *New Straits Times* launching the "Community Unity Program," Dr. Mahathir Mohamad described the need to create a Malaysian race without eliminating the cultural elements of the various races that have made Malaysia their homeland. All the races were free to maintain their identity in forms of language, religion, and culture, he said. "However, when we achieved independence we made an agreement to accept the official name of the country as Malaysia, our race as the Malaysian race, and our language as Bahasa Malaysia. . . . From the ethnic point of view, we belong to a particular nation. . . .

"We must have a language and a culture that will determine that we are truly a Malaysian race and that we owe our loyalty to the same nation."

He said it would be meaningless for Malaysians to admit they were from the same race if the various races did not interact with one another.

Dr. Mahathir hoped that the older generation who still had certain racial prejudices would not be concerned about losing their ethnic identity.

He said they should not doubt the government's efforts to spread Bahasa Malaysia, adding that if the people could interact and communicate with one another through a common language, the country would be able to create a culture that is truly recognized as Malaysian.

The prime minister said a society that had a common nation, language, and culture would be able to have the same identity and would be recognized as one race, and that "wherever we go, this recognition will be a reality.

"We will no longer be mistaken for another race. When we take pride in this recognition, it is then that a true Malaysian race will emerge."

How long will this take? Two generations, estimated the prime minister, if the older generation stopped influencing the younger generation with their "unfounded" worries about losing their ethnic identity.