

Turmoil in Malaysia as PM Mahathir resigns

● Political allies sought to form a new coalition

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● Mahathir previously served as premier from 1981 to 2003

AFP | Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad resigned yesterday in a shock move after his political allies sought to form a new coalition in a bid to block the succession of leader-in-waiting Anwar Ibrahim.

It followed weekend political drama that saw an attempt by Anwar's rivals within his own "Pact of Hope" coalition -- which stormed to a historic election victory in 2018 -- and opposition politicians to form a new government.

That coalition would reportedly have excluded Anwar, Mahathir's presumptive successor and a former opposition icon who was jailed for years on questionable sodomy charges, blocking his ascent to the premiership.

Anwar and Mahathir -- the world's oldest leader, aged 94 -- have a notoriously stormy relationship but joined forces to oust a corruption-plagued government at the 2018 polls.

Mahathir, who previously served as premier from 1981 to 2003, had made a pre-election pledge to hand power to Anwar



Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has submitted his resignation to the king



Anwar Ibrahim

but has repeatedly refused to fix a date.

With the ruling coalition's fate still uncertain on Monday morning, Mahathir's office made the surprise announcement that he had "sent a resignation letter as prime minister of Malaysia" to the king at 1:00 pm (0500 GMT). No reason was given.

Shortly before, Mahathir's Bersatu party announced it was leaving the ruling coalition and 11 lawmakers resigned from Anwar's party, leaving the Pact of Hope in tatters and fuelling suggestions efforts could be under way to form a new alliance.

Despite speculation Mahathir -- a wily political operator known for authoritarian tendencies during his first stint in power -- was leading the push for a new coalition, Anwar in-

sisted this was not true.

Anwar said Mahathir had assured him Monday that "he played no part in it", adding he was "very clear that in no way will he ever work with those associated with the past regime".

According to local media, the new coalition would have included the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the party of disgraced ex-leader Najib Razak, which was ejected from power in 2018.

'Nefarious' bid to topple govt

Lim Guan Eng -- a senior member of the Democratic Action Party, which formed part of the "Pact of Hope" -- said that Mahathir told him that he was resigning in protest at the "nefarious attempt" to topple the government.

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"Mahathir clearly stated that he cannot work with UMNO when we worked so hard to reject UMNO successfully in the 2018 general elections," he said.

He added his party would nominate Mahathir to continue as prime minister at an emergency meeting Monday evening.

The final outcome of the drama was far from clear, however, and some analysts said a snap poll could be called.

Both Anwar and Mahathir had audiences Monday with the king, although their intentions were unclear. While his role is largely ceremonial, the monarch appoints the country's prime minister, who must show he commands the support of a majority of MPs.

Many Malaysians were angry at the prospect of the democratically elected government being replaced without an election.

The people "will not agree to or cooperate with any 'backdoor' government formed out of the selfish, self-preservation agenda of certain MPs", said a statement from a group of leading activists and academics.

Anwar had teamed up with former nemesis Mahathir to oust the government of Najib, who had become embroiled in the massive 1MDB graft scandal, and

they led their alliance to victory against a coalition that had ruled Malaysia for six decades.

The pair's difficult relationship has dominated Malaysia's political landscape for over two decades. Anwar was sacked from government in the 1990s by Mahathir and then convicted of corruption and sodomy, in what his critics said was a politically motivated case.

The Pact of Hope had always seemed an uneasy alliance and their popularity had been falling, as they were accused by critics of failing to look after the country's ethnic Malay Muslim majority and push forward reforms.

Race and protection of Malays rights are highly sensitive in Malaysia, which is about 60 percent Muslim but also home to substantial ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

Sequins, skin and politics as Rio carnival opens

AFP | Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro kicked off its annual carnival parades Sunday in a swirl of glitter, sequins and barely covered skin, an over-the-top spectacle that this year is packed with political commentary on Brazil's far-right government.

Vying for the title of carnival champions, the city's 13 top samba schools get around one hour each to wow spectators and judges with elaborate shows flush with scantily clad dancers, small armies of drummers and huge floats built on seemingly impossible feats of engineering.

The event has taken a particularly political turn after a year under far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who has deeply divided Brazil with his overt attacks on just about every cause close to the carnival community's heart: diversity, gay rights, environmentalism, the arts.

"This carnival has a lot of protests because we want the world to see what's going on here. There are lots of people who are against this very extreme government," said Camila Rocha, dressed as an enormous gemstone as she prepared to enter the "Sambadrome," the massive avenue-turned-stadium where the groups parade.

Her samba school, Estacio de Sa, kicked things off with a show on the theme of "rocks" that featured floats covered in dinosaurs



Right, a parade. Left, Members of the Viradouro samba school perform during the first night of Rio's carnival parade at the Sambadrome



Some samba schools depicted Jesus, others chose themes such as fake news in Brazil's 2018 presidential race and black and women's rights



Often based in Rio de Janeiro's poorest neighborhoods, the samba schools spend most of the year getting ready for carnival

(prehistoric rocks), sparkling diamonds (precious rocks) and, finally, the moon.

Director Rosa Magalhaes said that was meant to evoke the Earth turning into a barren, moon-like rock -- the kind of environmental catastrophe that critics warn the world could face if Brazil does not do a better job protecting the Amazon.

Bolsonaro has faced condemnation from environmentalists and the international community over his policies on the world's largest rainforest.

Deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon increased 85.3 percent in his first year in office.

Biblical battle

Reigning champions Mangueira then threw religion into the mix.

Their show depicted Jesus returning as a resident of one of Rio's impoverished favela neighborhoods and preaching a message of tolerance -- only to be beaten and persecuted by the police.

Mangueira presented various revisionist versions of Jesus -- black, a woman, a man in eye-shadow and rouge.

That drew backlash even before the parade from a key group of Bolsonaro supporters, Christian fundamentalists, who sent

the school a petition calling the show "blasphemous."

"It caused a huge controversy, but the school was just celebrating tolerance," said Sirio Sazer, a 34-year-old lawyer decked out as a Roman soldier for the show.

Another group, Uniao da Ilha, also explored the theme of police violence in poor communities, after killings by the authorities in Rio de Janeiro state surged by 18 percent last year, setting a record.

The group's floats were encircled by police helicopters. Instead of firing bullets, though, these helicopters, marked "Agents of the Peace," fired

white T-shirts and glitter.

"We want the general public to know our community isn't just violence," said one "pilot," Leandro Barcelos, 36, after a crane extracted him from his helicopter at the finish line.

The most successful school in the history of the contest, Portela, wrapped up the first of two days of parades well after dawn, with a tribute to Brazil's indigenous Tupinamba people.

Their central samba song featured veiled criticism of Bolsonaro and Rio Mayor Marcelo Crivella, a fellow far-right politician who is also a bishop in one of Brazil's biggest evangelical mega-churches.