Ismail Sabri Yaakob was named Malaysia’s new prime minister on 20 August 2021 after the previous government collapsed. Photo: Arif KARTONO, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Ismail Sabri Yaakob, Malaysia’s ninth Prime Minister, is the first who is not a party leader. He is only the third highest-ranked leader in UMNO. He is Malaysia’s third premier in 39 months.

- In his first Prime Ministerial address, Ismail Sabri articulated a new vision called “Keluarga Malaysia” (Malaysian Family), affirming inclusiveness and urging all parliamentarians to work towards common ground. However, his commitment to this is uncertain given his track record of stoking ethnic sentiments for political gain.

- Ismail Sabri’s grip over UMNO is tenuous and he faces a party election that must be held by late 2022. The current top two leaders in UMNO are hostile to Bersatu, which is part of Ismail Sabri’s coalition. If Ismail Sabri is defeated in the party election, his position as Prime Minister will become untenable.

- The Islamist party PAS holds significant leverage in the current government. Ismail Sabri is the first PM to give PAS complete control over the religious affairs ministry. He walks a tightrope as he needs PAS to offset his weakness in UMNO, but he must also retain the support of East Malaysian parties wary of PAS’s legislative agenda.

- To circumvent the uncertainties surrounding his fragile coalition and the anticipated leadership tussle within UMNO, Ismail Sabri has reached out to the Pakatan Harapan opposition coalition. An imminent test of his government’s ability to forge multi-party consensus on policies to lift the country out of the health and economic crises will be seen in whether the opposition’s inputs are incorporated into the annual budget to be presented in October. Progress in achieving this would augur well for the evolution of Malaysia’s democracy away from the divisive and “winner takes all” politics of the past.

- However, the impending state and party elections indicate that Malaysia will undergo a period of political uncertainty, which is not atypical following the ending of strongman rule and one-party dominance.
INTRODUCTION

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has retaken the Prime Minister’s office just 39 months after losing the general election, but not all is well within the party. Although newly minted Malaysian Prime Minister, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, is from UMNO, he is not the top party leader and is politically dependent on its coalitional ally-cum-electoral rivals, the Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). Ismail Sabri’s “weak” position presents opportunities – and potential perils – for Malaysia as he seeks to foster a new political equilibrium and steer Malaysia toward recovery.

Ismail Sabri announced a bloated cabinet of 70 ministers and deputy ministers, almost a third of the total Members of Parliament. As political scientist Wong Chin Huat observed, this “payroll vote” is necessary to sustain the prime minister’s slim majority in Malaysia’s parliamentary democracy. He maintained continuity with Muhyiddin Yassin’s cabinet – all but four ministers are retained in the cabinet. Under Ismail Sabri’s cabinet, UMNO has a net gain of two ministers and crucially, has wrested the rural development ministry and the housing and local government ministry – both rich in resources and patronage – back from Bersatu. UMNO also now completely controls the Communications ministry, whose messaging channels and personnel hiring will be useful in the general election which has to be held within two years. Given his position as non-party leader with untested majority in Parliament (as of the time of writing), his premiership in the coming months will require him to consolidate his power internally (within UMNO as well as within his coalition) and externally (through a confidence and supply agreement with the opposition).

Ismail Sabri is the first Malaysian Prime Minister who is not a party leader. In parliamentary democracies, the positions of Prime Minister or Opposition Leader often belong to the leader of a political party. But Ismail Sabri is only the third highest-ranked leader in UMNO (Table 1). He is one of three Vice Presidents of the party (he received the highest votes among the three winners in the 2018 party election, and hence became the most senior among them). He was appointed to the premiership out of the force of circumstance: UMNO president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi faces 47 charges for misuse of funds, and another 33 charges for corruption, while UMNO deputy president Mohamad Hasan is not eligible because he is not a Member of Parliament. Being the highest ranked UMNO leader in the previous cabinet under Muhyiddin, Ismail Sabri was appointed as Deputy Prime Minister on 7 July 2021. Slightly more than a month later, Muhyiddin resigned, on 16 August, after a faction of UMNO parliamentarians aligned to the party president withdrew their support and Muhyiddin failed to reach a confidence-and-supply agreement with the opposition to remain in power. Five days of political uncertainty ensued, and it was Ismail Sabri who cobbled a sufficient majority to be sworn in as the ninth Prime Minister on 21 August.
Table 1: Top five UMNO leaders for the term 2018-2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Party post</th>
<th>Current position in government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahmad Zahid Hamidi</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohamad Hasan</td>
<td>Deputy President</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ismail Sabri Yaakob</td>
<td>Vice Presidents</td>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahdzir Khalid</td>
<td></td>
<td>Minister of Rural Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khaled Nordin</td>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ISMAIL SABRI’S PREMIERSHIP ON ETHNIC RELATIONS: A HISTORY AND AN OUTLOOK

In his first address to the nation as Prime Minister, Ismail Sabri articulated a new vision called “Keluarga Malaysia” (Malaysian Family). He pleaded for Parliamentarians to put aside differences and forge consensus, and affirmed the inclusive diversity of “the Malaysian Family.”

However, is “Keluarga Malaysia” a credible commitment on his part? In the past, Ismail Sabri had often demonstrated a willingness to stoke ethnic sentiments for political gains. For example, in 2015, a quick spiral of events turned violent in Kuala Lumpur: a theft incident in Lowyat Mall was followed by ethnically charged incitements and misinformation, which led to confrontations between Malay and Chinese groups. Ismail Sabri, who was then minister in charge of rural development, jumped the gun before police investigations concluded. He expressed sympathy for one group and called upon Malay customers to boycott Chinese businesses. Not only that, he ended the Facebook post by lamenting that the Chinese will continue to “oppress the Malays” if they do not change. He later clarified that his intention was to urge consumers to organize against price increases, but his emphasis on ethnicity was unmistakable. He also seized the occasion to launch MARA Digital Mall, a knee-jerk reaction to the riot, to promote Bumiputra entrepreneurs. The initiative proved to be a policy failure and cost losses to the ministry.

On another occasion, a mere three years ago, Ismail Sabri opposed the government’s plan to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). In a public rally, he riled up the predominantly Malay Muslim crowd by grumbling about the erosion of Malay rights, lamenting the expansion of equal opportunities for other ethnic groups and falsely claiming that Bibles were being publicly distributed to Muslims. As opposition leader in 2019, he challenged the government to ban the Chinese educationist group, the United Chinese School Committees’ Association (Dong Zong).

Far from revisiting Ismail Sabri’s personal history, these instances point to a reckless proclivity in jeopardizing ethnic relations. He had no qualms speaking and writing the words “Bangsa DAP”, a derogatory term with racist undertones. In a divided society such as Malaysia, Ismail Sabri’s previous actions in public office do not inspire confidence.
Table 2: Key events in Ismail Sabri Yaakob’s political career

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987-1993</td>
<td>Appointed to party positions at the division level in Pahang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Appointed political secretary to Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism, Sabaruddin Chik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Elected UMNO division leader and Member of Parliament of Bera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>Appointed Minister of Youth and Sports under the third Abdullah Badawi cabinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2013</td>
<td>Appointed Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs under the first Najib Razak cabinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2015</td>
<td>Appointed Minister of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industries under the second Najib Razak cabinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2018</td>
<td>Appointed Minister of Rural and Regional Development under Najib Razak’s cabinet reshuffle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2018</td>
<td>Retained Bera parliamentary constituency for the fourth consecutive term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2018</td>
<td>Elected as UMNO Vice President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>Appointed as Leader of the Opposition by Barisan Nasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2020</td>
<td>Appointed Senior Minister in charge of security affairs by Muhyiddin Yassin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2021</td>
<td>Appointed Deputy Prime Minister by Muhyiddin Yassin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2021</td>
<td>Appointed Prime Minister by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That said, historical precedents provide clues that Ismail Sabri will at least tone down his ethnic appeal when he governs as Prime Minister. Before he became the country’s first premier, Tunku Abdul Rahman was distrustful of non-Malay loyalty to the polity, stating that “It is not fair for the Malays to throw in their lot with others when others refused to be naturalized, refused to study the language, and refused to adopt the customs of the country.” However, he went on to govern liberally as Prime Minister and even appointed a Chinese as finance minister. Similarly, Mahathir Mohamad was seen as the firebrand author of “The Malay Dilemma” prior to his premiership but it was he who promoted Bangsa Malaysia as Prime Minister. Former Prime Minister Najib Razak also started the 1Malaysia campaign immediately after becoming the premier. To an extent, Ismail Sabri has already moved in this direction with his “Keluarga Malaysia” vision, but a credible measure of his sincerity would be the extent to which he refrains from the ethnic appeals he had frequently invoked in the past.

Yet the logical reason underpinning this shift to the centre – to appeal to the broader electorate beyond one’s own party base – does not always reap the intended rewards. Najib’s 1Malaysia campaign failed to attract Chinese voters in the 2013 general election. Najib subsequently abandoned the 1Malaysia campaign and pivoted to the right in the run-up to the 2018 general election. He openly flirted with PAS to enable the Islamist party’s president, Abdul Hadi Awang, to table a private member’s bill on the empowerment of Shariah courts.
Ismail Sabri is in a unique position because while he is from UMNO, he initially did not have unanimous support from the party to remain in Muhyiddin’s cabinet. He broke ranks with the top two party chiefs and led a group of UMNO Members of Parliament to side with the Perikatan Nasional government. In doing so, he was rewarded and made Deputy Prime Minister with support from PAS and Bersatu.

Without full backing from his own party, Ismail Sabri is politically dependent on both PAS and Bersatu. As a matter of fact, a dark horse in Ismail’s cabinet is PAS. The party has been quiet since forming the Perikatan Nasional government with Muhyiddin (and now Ismail Sabri). If they become assertive and press for their ideologically-driven goals – for instance, a legislation empowering Shariah courts and paving the way for Hudud implementation – they could reinvigorate ethnic and religious polarization in the country. It is noteworthy that under Ismail Sabri’s new cabinet, PAS now completely helms the ministry of religious affairs for the first time. PAS’s increasing leverage can be observed in a recent announcement of several bills being proposed to strengthen Shariah laws. Will Ismail Sabri’s dependency on PAS’s loyalty lead to concessions in religious conservatism, or will he contain their ambition out of fear that PAS’s agenda will cost him support from East Malaysian parties? Already, the Sabah chief minister has publicly objected to the proposed bills on Control and Restrictions on the Expansion of non-Islam Religions, which is one of the four new Shariah bills. Regardless, Ismail Sabri would be wise to avoid Shariah-related issues till at least after the Sarawak state election.

POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY AND POLITICAL EQUILIBRIUM

As Professor Abdul Rahman Embong concluded in a recent webinar organized by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, there may not be a clear winner in GE15. If that turns out to be the case, political fragmentation will remain for a while. What is perceived as instability, however, is not necessarily a liability for Malaysia’s long-term democratic development. In Japan and Indonesia, for example, there were a series of rapidly changing governments in the initial period following the fall of a strongman rule or dominant party rule before a new (and hopefully democratic) equilibrium was found.

The political order under Ismail Sabri is shaky. Within his party, Ismail Sabri must face the UMNO party election, which must be held by the end of 2022. The timing for this will depend on the timing of the general election. Will Ismail Sabri contest the presidency? It is unprecedented enough that a non-party leader was appointed Prime Minister, but it is more bizarre if he does not consolidate power within his party. Marshalling the incumbency advantage as Prime Minister, Ismail Sabri could make a bid for the party presidency by assembling a team with UMNO ministers in his cabinet, such as Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein. The party election will probably take place first before the general election so that whoever emerges party president will get to pick election candidates and lead the party into the general election.
An important detail in Ismail Sabri’s cabinet lies not just in who is in, but who is excluded: Ahmad Zahid (current UMNO president), Mohamad Hassan (deputy president), and Khaled Nordin (vice president and former Menteri Besar of Johor). The UMNO president has the power to sign the candidate nomination form, which means he has the final say in determining the party’s election candidates. Without becoming party president, Ismail Sabri cannot pick his slate of candidates (presumably loyal to him) and in fact, cannot unilaterally settle seat negotiations with other parties in his coalition, such as Bersatu. This could be a test of two incumbent advantages: does the incumbency advantage of the Prime Minister outweigh the incumbency advantage of the party president? In the event that Ismail Sabri is defeated in the party election, however, his position as Prime Minister will become untenable.

In preparing for UMNO’s party election, Ismail Sabri will have to strike a delicate balance between campaigning to be a party leader who prioritizes UMNO’s interest, without antagonizing or yielding to Bersatu. Between UMNO and Bersatu, ties are rocky and Ismail Sabri’s government is at risk if factions within the two parties fall out again. As it is, they are unable to even agree on the name of the new government: one faction still calls it the Perikatan Nasional government, while another faction rejects any association with Perikatan Nasional. For as long as Bersatu exists, UMNO cannot be returned as the sole dominant party because of their overlapping constituencies. Thus, the current top two UMNO leaders have rejected cooperation with Muhyiddin’s Bersatu, to which Ismail Sabri’s faction is less hostile. They will need to wrestle for the UMNO leadership if they wish to form an electoral agreement and negotiate seats with Bersatu and Perikatan Nasional for the general election. Though ousted as prime minister, Muhyiddin does not plan to retire from politics. He has in fact already been appointed chairman of the National Recovery Council, and recently vowed to lead Bersatu and Perikatan Nasional into the general election.

This could well be the reason PAS sided with Bersatu under Perikatan Nasional and deprioritized their pre-existing partnership with UMNO under Muafakat Nasional. UMNO president was so slighted at PAS’s “loyalty” to Bersatu that he virtually claimed that the Muafakat Nasional partnership is as good as dead. With Bersatu’s weak presence on the east coast, PAS are virtually assured of retaining their rule in their coveted bases, Kelantan, Terengganu and perhaps Kedah. On the other hand, a partnership with UMNO would entail a more equal sharing of power. Why would PAS settle for equal partnership when they can be the Big Brother on the east coast? Since UMNO is the traditional electoral opponent for PAS prior to the 2018 alignment, a consolidated UMNO would threaten PAS’s political interests. In addition, PAS has always been the political beneficiary of an UMNO split. This happened in the 1990, 1999, 2008, and 2018 elections, and it would therefore be in their interest to draw out the UMNO-Bersatu rivalry for as long as possible.

Given the context of his fragile coalition and uncertainty surrounding UMNO leadership, Ismail Sabri has sought to forge a temporary stabilizing order by reaching out to the opposition for support. He met with top opposition leaders prior to the cabinet announcement and in September, leaders from the ruling and the opposition coalitions signed a Memorandum of Understanding for Transformation and Political Stability.
could well be a rare opportunity for substantive reforms and democratization, though it is not clear whether the MoU has any legally binding obligations.37

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Ismail Sabri has been catapulted to Malaysia’s highest office under the most unusual circumstances. For the first time, the prime minister is not the president, chairman, or de facto leader of a political party. Compared to his predecessors, Ismail Sabri’s relatively “weak” position – within his party and the fragile coalition – presents unique challenges to his premiership.

The MoU signed by the ruling and opposition coalitions helps to set the tone for a new political culture that is less fixated on a winner-takes-all rationale.

The spirit of cooperation will be tested in late October when the government tables the budget. Will the government incorporate the opposition’s inputs into the budget and meet public expectations? If they do, will the opposition honour their word and pass the budget?

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4 “Zahid slapped with 33 more charges for receiving RM42.7m bribes”, The Edge, 27 June 2019. https://www.thedegemarkets.com/article/zahid-slapped-33-more-charges-0
5 Mohamad Hasan, popularly known as Tok Mat, was former Menteri Besar of Negeri Sembilan from 2004 to 2018 and is now leader of the opposition in the Negeri Sembilan state assembly. In the 2018 party election, he defeated Annuar Musa, the current Minister of Communications and Multimedia, to be elected the 11th UMNO deputy president.
6 “Malaysia’s opposition, key ally reject PM’s offer for bipartisan support”, Reuters, 13 August 2021. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysias-opposition-key-ally-reject-pms-offer-bipartisan-support-2021-08-14/
14 The video clip, shared in a Facebook group called “Penyatuan Ummah” by a user, is titled “ICERD & Agenda DAP: Luahan Rasa DS Ismail Sabri Yaakob, Naib Presiden UMNO #Benteng153.” https://www.facebook.com/groups/PenyatuanUmmah/posts/924931844725949
16 “Ismail Sabri: Malaysia currently ruled by ‘bangsa DAP’”, KiniTV, 2019. Video available at: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x75351o
18 The Straits Times, 18 September 1951.
19 A “Made for Television” moment was captured in December 2016 when Najib and Hadi, then party presidents of UMNO and PAS respectively, jointly appeared in a rally to support Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslims. The bitter irony was that it was the Perikatan Nasional government, of which UMNO and PAS were part of, which launched a harsh crackdown on Rohingya refugees in 2020.
23 The Minister of Religious Affairs, Idris Ahmad, and the deputy minister, Ahmad Marzuk Shary, are both from PAS. It is the only ministry over which PAS has complete control.
26 A state of emergency has been extended in Sarawak until February 2022 to suspend the state election due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An extension is possible after the date.

It was Ross Tapsell from the Australian National University who first drew the parallel between contemporary Malaysia and Indonesia in the immediate aftermath of the Suharto regime’s collapse. https://twitter.com/RossTapsell/status/1427418272874438656. Although the context differs because the Suharto’s regime collapsed while Barisan Nasional lost the election to the opposition coalition, there is some parallel in the rapid and fluid regrouping of political elites before a new political equilibrium stabilizes.


“According to UMNO’s party constitution, clause 8.2 states that the annual general assembly (AGM) must be held annually at a time decided by the Supreme Council so long as it does not exceed 18 months after the previous AGM. The 2020 AGM was held on March 2021 (It was also postponed due to the pandemic). The 2021 AGM, the one that is currently being postponed, must be held within the subsequent 18 months, which is by August 2022.”


“Zahid hints Muafakat Nasional is dead,” The Malaysian Insight, 30 Sept 2021 https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/342460


