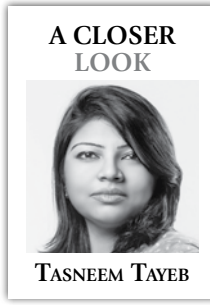


Allies, alliances and turncoats

Crosscurrents of Malaysian politics



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

AT 92, Mahathir

Mohamad, the world's oldest serving president, came into the limelight recently, but for all the wrong reasons.

On February 22, without any prior notice, Mahathir suddenly tendered his resignation as the prime minister of the country, less than two years into his tenure. It has been reported in multiple media outlets that Mahathir has resigned because he was under pressure from his own new party Bersatu—which he formed after resigning from United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)—to allow UMNO to be a part of his political coalition Pakhtan Harapan or as its translated in English, Alliance of Hope. This was not acceptable to Mahathir and for good reasons.

Mahathir Mohamad quit UMNO in February 2016, after a long association with the party spanning decades and which empowered him to be the prime minister of Malaysia between 1981 and 2003. Why? Because Mahathir could not support the party's backing for the actions of the then prime minister Najib Razak, who was embroiled in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) corruption scandal: he has been accused of embezzling RM 2.6 billion from 1MDB, a state fund.

Mahathir made sure Najib Razak was ousted from power and made accountable for his deeds. The charismatic leader formed his own



Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (Right), politician Anwar Ibrahim (Centre) and newly sworn in Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin in Kuala Lumpur on June 1, 2018.

PHOTO: MOHD RASFAN/AFP

party, the Malaysian United Indigenous Party or (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia) in short Bersatu, along with another former UMNO party man Muhyiddin Yassin, then formed the coalition Pakhtan Harapan and won a sweeping election victory in 2018, dethroning the long reign of UMNO, which single-handedly ruled over Malaysia ever since its independence.

But to do so, Mahathir had to form an alliance of sorts with his long-time protégé-turned-rival Anwar Ibrahim, who Mahathir had ousted from office in 1998 and later was charged with and jailed in making the alliance. There was a catch though: Anwar was made Mahathir's successor with the condition that the latter would hand over power to him in the future. And this arrangement

of convenience was Mahathir's undoing. While Anwar joined hands with Mahathir to push Najib and UMNO out of power, he along with his sympathisers were soon wondering when Mahathir would announce the shift of power. But that day never came.

And then there were other rifts within Pakhtan Harapan—the coalition of four political parties across various racial, religious and ideological lines. Mahathir was determined to implement his "New Malaysia" agenda, that surfaced so prominently in his election campaign that saw his surprising return to power.

As reported by Bloomberg, one of the major discords surfaced when Mahathir suggested Maju Group, a local Malaysian conglomerate, take

over PLUS Malaysia Bhd., the highway operator of Malaysia, which was being handled by the finance ministry of the country. The idea was that Maju Group would get government contracts for road maintenance, but in return would scrap toll fees. Things, however, didn't pan out as expected as all bids for PLUS had to be rejected in the face of growing internal opposition.

And of course, there were whispers in the grapevine about Mahathir planning to announce his son Mukhriz, the Chief Minister of Kedah, to be his successor. This resulted in increased discontent; the infighting within the coalition culminated in the betrayal of Mahathir by Muhyiddin Yassin, who welcomed UMNO into the Pakhtan Harapan coalition after Mahathir resigned as chairman of Bersatu and geared up enough support to be sworn in as the next prime minister of Malaysia.

But this move has got many worried. First of all, unlike Mahathir, Muhyiddin is known to have strong pull towards his Malay identity—according to a report by the *New York Times*, he once controversially labelled himself as, "Malay first" and Malaysian second". This strong purist tendency of Muhyiddin raises questions about whether he is fit to be the leader of a nation that is so diverse in its ethnic mosaic.

Similarly, the ethnic Chinese community and other minority groups also fear the UMNO's allies, some of whom according to the *New York Times*, have in the past "publicly supported turning Malaysia into an Islamic state".

Then there are fears among the people about Pakhtan Harapan joining hands with UMNO, severely tainted by

the corruption allegations against its leaders. According to the same report by the *New York Times*, this alliance of convenience has stoked fears of retribution among the reformists and whistle-blowers who had opposed and exposed Najib's financial shenanigans.

In the face of all this, perhaps what everyone fears most is Malaysia plunging into a spiralling political chaos in the context of an already struggling economy. According to a *Reuters* report, "Malaysia's economic growth slowed to the weakest in a decade in the fourth quarter of 2019" and in the face of the coronavirus outbreak, trade and investment are going to be affected, adding to the economic woes of the country.

The sustainability of this coalition of turncoats is also under question, especially because it was Najib who had ousted Muhyiddin from the previous UMNO cabinet, because the latter had raised concerns about Najib's alleged plundering of national funds.

But in a world of intrigue and changing allegiance; a world that is driven by the lust for power, anything can happen. This new arrangement might last long. Or this can dissolve in a few months. Even Mahathir might make a strong comeback when the Malaysian parliament convenes on May 18. It was initially scheduled to convene on March 9, 2020, but has been postponed for two months, thanks to Muhyiddin.

But Malaysia's national interests—its growth, its diversity and its values—should not fall victim to the political machinations of power-hungry individuals.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem

CoViD-19: Facts vs fear

MONICA BEG

GLOBALLY, the latest threat to public health is the "Coronavirus Disease-2019", (CoViD-19), which is essentially a respiratory disease.

It was first detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.

What is the coronavirus?

It is a large family of similar viruses, which are responsible for most common illnesses, ranging from the common cold and cough to more serious illnesses, such as Middle-East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

The virus responsible for CoViD-19 is named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), and it is a new member of the coronavirus family.

All viruses in the coronavirus family are "Zoonotic", meaning that they are transmitted from animals to humans. For example, MERS-CoV is transmitted by dromedary camels, SARS-CoV was associated with civet cats, and the most likely ecological reservoirs for SARS-CoV-2 are bats. Scientists, however, speculate that the virus has been transmitted to humans from another intermediate animal host. These intermediate animals may either be domesticated or wild, and have not yet been identified.

CoViD-19 and the current situation

Detailed epidemiological and clinical description of the first 425 CoViD-19 patients in Wuhan, China shows that the median age of the patients was 59 years, and that 56 percent of the patients were male. The morbidity and mortality were higher among the elderly and among those who had pre-existing chronic illnesses (such as hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes). Not a single one of them was below the age of 15 years. This could be for two reasons: either such children were less likely to be infected by CoViD-19, or their symptoms were so mild that their infections could not be detected. This is

important information, and is helping public health experts develop effective strategies to contain and prevent the spread of CoViD-19.

Based on existing data, CoViD-19's mortality rate is about 2 percent. However, the authors of another article published in a journal report a mortality of 1.4 percent among 1,099 CoViD-19 patients with confirmed lab diagnosis. If we assume that the number of untested people—those who had few symptoms or none—was several times higher, then the actual mortality rate might be less than 1 percent.

From this, we can assume that the mortality rate in CoViD-19 will still be: i) Higher than severe seasonal influenza (the mortality rate of which is 0.1 percent), or the influenza pandemics in 1957 and 1968.

ii) But lower than MERS (which has a mortality rate of 36 percent) and SARS (which has a mortality rate of 9-10 percent).

To develop effective strategies and tools to control these coronaviruses, the experts take into consideration how quickly and efficiently a particular type of coronavirus attacks the human respiratory tract. Based on the information available till now, one CoViD-19 infected person can infect approximately an additional two persons. Until we can break the chain of infection, and bring this number down to below one, the CoViD-19 infection will probably continue to spread.

It should be noted here that the symptoms are usually very mild in the first few days after being infected with CoViD-19. But during that time, the concentration of the virus is extremely high inside the mouth and upper part of the throat of the infected person. As a result, during those first few days, a CoViD-19 infected person can easily infect an uninfected person.

To prevent the spread of CoViD-19, several countries, including China and the United States, have imposed temporary travel restrictions. On a temporary basis, such restrictions may help to reduce the spread of the virus. However, considering the overall

situation, we need to be prepared to comply with some of the more restrictive requirements, such as social distancing, voluntary isolation at home, postponing large gatherings, working from home whenever possible, etc.

In the meantime, various research institutes around the world are working tirelessly to develop an effective vaccine to tackle CoViD-19. The first trial is expected in May-June of this year.

How CoViD-19 spreads

According to available data, SARS-CoV-2 can spread directly through small droplets, which are released when a SARS-CoV-2 infected person coughs, sneezes or exhales.

Often, droplets containing SARS-CoV-2 also land on objects and surfaces

called, "WHO: How to handwash? With soap and water", available on YouTube.

ii) Avoid shaking hands, hugging and kissing in workplaces and social gatherings.

iii) Maintain a distance of at least three feet from someone who is coughing or sneezing.

iv) Stop touching your eyes, nose and mouth unnecessarily.

v) Cover your nose and mouth with disposable tissue during coughing or sneezing, and ask others to do the same. After use, the tissue must immediately be dumped into a trash can, so that it does not come into contact with anyone else.

vi) Coronaviruses cannot survive at normal cooking temperature (70 degree

most people infected with CoViD-19 have very mild signs and symptoms. Some people may have no symptoms at all.

About 80 percent of the patients recover completely without any treatment.

The most common symptoms are: fever, fatigue, and dry cough. Some may have cold, sore throat, body ache and diarrhoea.

But for the elderly and those who have pre-existing chronic illnesses (such as hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes), the signs and symptoms can be severe, even life threatening.

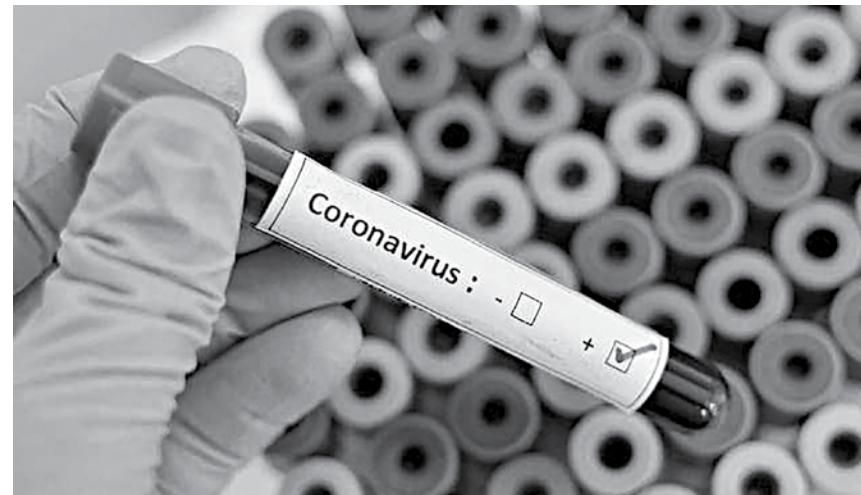
If someone has a fever, cough and/or breathing difficulties, irrespective of her/his age and pre-existing chronic illnesses, s/he must consult a doctor. However, if the sick person is in a country where there is a CoViD-19 helpline, s/he should call the helpline first without going directly to the doctor, and then act as instructed.

Treatment of CoViD-19

To date, no vaccine or targeted antiviral treatment is available against CoViD-19. The patients are provided supportive treatment and care to relieve symptoms. In severe cases, however, some doctors are trying out various antiviral drugs, as well as traditional Chinese medicine. In the near future, there may be a more effective treatment regimen, assuming successful clinical trials.

Finally, we must all keep in mind that these infectious diseases have come before, and will come again, and we have no choice but to be prepared for them. Preparation needs to be at the personal, family, and societal levels, as well as at the national, regional, and international levels. In this era of globalisation, viruses and bacteria have also been globalised. It is not possible for any one person, or one country, to deal with these challenges individually. The sooner we understand this, the sooner we will be able to ensure the health and well-being of our populations.

Dr Monica Beg, Chief, and Global Coordinator, HIV/AIDS Section, United Nations, Vienna, Austria. Her Twitter handle is: @MonicaBeg



In this era of globalisation, viruses and bacteria have also been globalised.

PHOTO: AFP

around the person. An uninfected person can be infected by SARS-CoV-2 by touching these contaminated objects or surfaces, and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

How to prevent CoViD-19

i) Wash hands frequently and regularly. Please note that 90 percent of people do not wash their hands properly—thumbs and fingertips are often not cleaned. The World Health Organization has a video link on how to wash hands properly

C). Therefore, as a general rule, raw or lightly cooked animal products should be avoided. Be careful when handling and cooking raw meat, raw milk, raw egg or raw fish.

vii) Stay home, if you feel unwell. viii) But if you have a fever, cough and/or breathing difficulties, you must call the Covid-19 helpline, and see a doctor.

Signs and symptoms of CoViD-19 One thing we must remember is that

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Throngs
- 7 Top-rated
- 11 Boo-boo
- 12 Choir voice
- 13 Egyptian landmark
- 14 Casual tops
- 15 Hardly wordy
- 16 Cherishes
- 17 Search out
- 18 Closing number
- 19 Sinuous fish
- 21 Danson of "The Good Place"
- 22 Practical joker's gadget
- 25 Soft shoe, for short
- 26 Second letter
- 27 Foot parts
- 29 Guitar accessory
- 33 Team
- 34 Bender
- 35 Enterprise crewman
- 36 Individually
- 37 Catching need
- 38 Bitter component of tea
- 39 Different
- 40 Little dears

DOWN

- 1 Goes for
- 2 Indian coin
- 3 Earthy colour
- 4 Shot make-up
- 5 Eat in style
- 6 Scandal subject
- 7 Relay need
- 8 Raise
- 9 Pittsburgh pro
- 10 Flung
- 16 "Mephisto Waltz" composer
- 18 Chimney parts
- 20 Diminished
- 22 Yellow flower
- 23 Hides from view
- 24 Warming in the microwave
- 25 "Are you glad I'm back?"
- 28 - cuisine
- 30 Tony winner
- Worth
- 31 Baseball's Fielder
- 32 Wails
- 34 Reach across
- 36 - loss

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B	A	D	A	T	E	L	W	A	Y
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S	P	A	R	K	S	O	N	G	S
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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 6, 1924
King Tut's tomb opened

On this day in 1924, the Egyptian government opened the mummy case of King Tutankhamen, ruler of Egypt in the 14th century, whose burial chamber had been discovered in 1922 by renowned British archaeologist Howard Carter.