Malay Politics: Parlous Condition, Continuing Problems

By Khoo Boo Teik

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In late February 2020, the Mahathir Mohamad-led Pakatan Harapan (Harapan, or Pact of Hope) government ended abruptly. Amidst ensuing confusion, Muhyiddin Yassin led defecting Harapan Members of Parliament, joined by UMNO and PAS, in an ad hoc Perikatan Nasional (PN, or National Alliance) coalition to form a “backdoor government”.
- The PN protagonists cast themselves as a “Malay-Muslim front” for preserving Malay dominance. Yet they unwittingly exposed the parlous state of their “Malay politics”, as shown by an absence of “Malay unity”, strongly contested claims to represent the Malays, intense party factionalism, and subverted leadership transitions.
- The parlousness of Malay politics emerged from the failure of the Malay political class to meet many challenges between 1997 and 2018. As the New Economic Policy and Vision 2020 political orders shed their combined twenty-five-year hegemony, Malay politics could not recover its declining popular support and legitimacy, or craft a fresh, broadly supported settlement.
- The present is an unsettled conjuncture: the old order is passing while Harapan’s experimental regime has been subverted. Yet Malay politics is unable to reform or tackle current issues authoritatively. Instead Malay politics has turned inwards and precipitated a disorder of the political system.