

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

Mahathir & Anwar vs Najib: How Will It End?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Malaysia's rambunctious politics has entered an even more unpredictable phase with political foes Mahathir Mohamad and jailed Anwar Ibrahim joining hands to unseat Prime Minister Najib Razak and push for systemic change. Where will all this lead?

Commentary

THE UNTHINKABLE is happening in Malaysian politics. It is triggered by the deepest political crisis the country has ever known, at the centre of which is Prime Minister Najib Razak. Forced by a common desire to end the turmoil by unseating Najib, two bitter foes – former premier Mahathir Mohammad and his jailed former deputy Anwar Ibrahim - have joined hands in what has long been thought an impossible alliance.

Aptly described as a sea-change in Malaysian politics, never before have such sworn enemies buried their hatchets for a common cause – and never before had that been a joint *cause celebre* to sack a sitting prime minister. By launching his rainbow “core group” of concerned citizens of various political stripes and leanings to “Save Malaysia”, Mahathir has once again thrust himself into the eye of the storm to redefine the political landscape. In the same vein, with Anwar in jail, all the disparate forces that have aligned themselves against Najib over the 1MDB investment fund scandal have finally found someone of stature to rally around in a marriage of convenience. It is ironic that the man who crushed the opposition while in power has remade himself in retirement as the de facto leader of what in essence is a citizens’ revolt.

Strange group or a potent movement?

Mahathir himself described this as a “very strange group of people” brought together by a common goal of citizens calling for the scandal-hit prime minister to be replaced. By calling it a “core group”, Mahathir is indicating that this is only the beginning of more moves to come. What could emerge down the road is yet hazy, perhaps even to the nanogenarian. But it is safe to say that a new era in Malaysian politics is unfolding with the key players jostling for a place in the shifting ground as they position themselves for a very uncertain road ahead.

Broadly speaking, politics and the people have become polarised into two groups. The first is pro-Najib, anchored around UMNO, the ruling party where the internal dissenters have been silenced while the loyalists do battle for Najib, as he fights for his survival to the bitter end. Opponents within and outside UMNO are being crippled or threatened one-by-one. Indeed the knives are now out to sack suspended deputy president and critic Muhyiddin Yassin as well as his allies Shafie Apdal and Mukhriz Mahathir for supporting Mahathir’s “Citizens’ Declaration” of 4 March.

The second group is basically the rest – the anti-Najib forces comprising nearly 50 of the country’s public luminaries such as Mahathir’s wife Dr Siti Hasmah Ali, DAP leader Lim Kit Siang, former MCA chief Ling Liong Sik, PKR deputy leader and Selangor chief minister Azmin Ali, PAS stalwarts Husam Musa and Mustafa Ali, Pakatan Harapan leader Mat Sabu, former cabinet ministers Daim Zainuddin and Zaid Ibrahim, as well as civil society leaders like Bersih’s Maria Chin Abdullah.

The Mahathir-Anwar tag-team aside, the convergence of forces pushing for systemic change and reform is equally unprecedented. Indeed, Anwar’s embrace of his foe’s mission signals that Mahathir has reciprocated in support of Anwar’s reform agenda, perhaps convinced that the entire system has been compromised by Najib’s survival manoeuvres. This is reflected in the concluding paragraph of the Citizens Declaration to “restore the important principle of the separation of powers among the executive, legislature and judiciary” which “will ensure the independence, credibility, professionalism and integrity of our national institutions” - all of which, ironically, had been undermined by Mahathir himself while in power.

Deep Split and Polarising Positions

As expected, Najib’s hardcore lieutenants have dismissed Mahathir’s latest strategy as leading nowhere. Some have even belittled Mahathir’s resignation – his second since 2008 when he forced his first successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi out - as something of a joke. Deputy prime minister Zahid Hamidi has painted Mahathir’s move as unconstitutional. While Najib has countered it as a “big mistake”, his office says the only lawful mechanism to change the prime minister or government is through elections. UMNO Youth even challenged the Mahathir-led movement to form up as a formal coalition and challenge the UMNO-led ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) in a general election.

Any misplaced sense of supreme confidence on the part of UMNO could, however, backfire. Mahathir’s second quitting may indeed not amount to much within UMNO, given that Najib has got the party effectively button-holed. But it would be foolhardy

to take lightly what the 90-year-old warhorse is now doing, which may well lead to big changes in Malaysian politics.

Although the UMNO-led BN won control of parliament in the last general election, it actually lost the popular vote – meaning the people’s confidence had migrated to the Anwar-led opposition. Given Najib’s current scandals which have been a lightning rod against UMNO, elections, if held today, could conceivably lead to the defeat of UMNO and BN. Mahathir’s son, Mukhriz, the deposed chief minister of Kedah state, said as much when he said “the opposition could easily win the next general election”; which was why the opposition had thrown their support behind Mahathir given their shared sense of urgency to save the country before more damage is done.

What Next?

Mahathir’s “core group” could be variously described as having features of civil disobedience, a people’s power movement, even a de facto “new opposition”. Prior to its launch, there had been talk of similar and overlapping moves, such as Zaid Ibrahim’s initiative for a 27 March closed-door gathering of like minds. There is also the plan by Dr Wan Azizah, PKR’s leader and Anwar’s wife, to convene national consensus talks. There is clearly a need for close coordination to avoid competing initiatives if they all are to be taken seriously. Significantly the Islamist PAS has not formally joined the anti-Najib alliance although some of its leaders had supported Mahathir.

But if Mahathir and his citizens’ movement could sustain themselves and grow, and the opposition recovers from its disunity - all climaxing towards the next general election to be called by 2018 - UMNO and BN could be in deep trouble. That growing trajectory in itself will have two possible consequences. The first is to trigger a nation-wide awakening that could transform into an anti-Najib groundswell, at the expense of UMNO/BN. The second is for this groundswell to put further pressure on UMNO to pre-empt the impending electoral defeat with a prior leadership change.

If this trajectory holds, UMNO - for its own survival - may be forced to explore two other options: vote Najib out, or craft unconventional strategies – such as allowing Najib to step down voluntarily, or even pave the way, reportedly, for a possible asylum. Face-saving compromises and “out-of-the-box” solutions should not be ruled out, given the new threshold that has been crossed and circumstances veering towards political instability - with wide-ranging repercussions and spillover effects on the wider Southeast Asian region.

Yang Razali Kassim is a Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
