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The Mahathir-Anwar Handshake: Patching Up to Shake Up?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Mahathir's surprise move to reach out to Anwar is promising to shake up Malaysian politics. Can they succeed?

Commentary

ON MONDAY 5 September 2016, former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad did the unthinkable: He turned up at the High Court for Anwar Ibrahim's filing of an interim injunction to stop the government from enforcing the newly-passed National Security Council Act. Mahathir shook hands with his former ally-turned nemesis and both exchanged pleasantries, as if they were friends again. He even wished Anwar well and prayed for the jailed opposition leader's success. Indeed both chatted for a good 45 minutes in the witness room – a long time indeed for two bitter foes.

It was the first time both had come into contact since Mahathir, then prime minister, unceremoniously sacked Anwar on 2 September 1998 as his deputy and subsequently had him jailed for abuse of power and sodomy. Coming just three days after the 18th anniversary of that fateful event, the Mahathir-Anwar handshake was a ground-breaking 'reunion'. Mahathir said he was there "not to talk about the past" but to show support for Anwar's bid against the NSC, which he, like Anwar, saw as unconstitutional and feared would give Prime Minister Najib Razak too much power.

What's Brewing?

This is, however, not the first time that Mahathir and Anwar have attempted to come together. Earlier in March, Mahathir launched his Citizens' Declaration 'rainbow

movement' to mobilise public support against Najib who is fighting for political survival arising from the 1MDB scandal.

There were moves at the time to get the divided political opposition to throw their support behind Mahathir who was emerging as Najib's harshest critic. Anwar, freed in 2004 but now back in jail, initially intimated his endorsement. He later pulled back when Mahathir showed more interest in just toppling Najib than to bring about sweeping reforms to the political system, including the national leadership. Anwar's change of heart raised doubts about his trust in Mahathir.

Anwar's wife, Dr Wan Azizah who succeeded him as opposition leader, is still bitter with Mahathir for throwing her husband into jail 18 years ago on what she still regards as trumped-up charges. After the historic meeting in court this week, Wan Azizah, though still guarded, seemed more accepting. If so, it could be because of Mahathir's gesture of apparent reconciliation. For a man of immense pride, Mahathir's decision to turn up in court to support Anwar was doubtless a big gesture. It was magnanimity, eating humble pie and *realpolitik* all rolled in one.

The shrewd politician that he is, Mahathir must be fully aware that his presence at Anwar's court hearing could be interpreted in many ways; one is whether or not this was a tacit apology to Anwar and his family. Wan Azizah said she would take things from here. Anwar, when besieged by the media, said "anybody who supports the reform agenda must be given a chance".

Rebuilding the Opposition?

Will this mark the start of yet another chapter in Malaysian politics? Top UMNO leaders as expected shot down the Mahathir-Anwar reconciliation as a political gimmick born out of Mahathir's desperation to unseat Najib. Nothing would come out of it, they said, not from two men who have lost faith in each other. But it would be a folly for UMNO to underestimate the Anwar-Mahathir tag team.

Both know that much can be done by them, if only they could overcome their animosity and join forces once again – as they did in the past. For in a rather deceptively peaceful way, Malaysian politics is going through an existential crisis that could do with their statesmanship.

On the ruling coalition side, the pillar that holds up the system – UMNO – is under pressure to defend or replace its controversy-ridden president who is also prime minister. If UMNO goes through another leadership upheaval, the entire ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition could unravel. The UMNO crisis has pushed Mahathir and former deputy premier Muhyiddin Yassin out of UMNO and into the fold of the anti-Najib front.

Yet the opposition, once strong and unified under the leadership of Anwar when he was free, is now suffering its own debacle. With Anwar back in jail, there is no leader of the same stature and pulling power, no rallying point. The once-promising multi-ethnic Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance) has now split and reconfigured to become Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope). In that leadership vacuum has emerged Mahathir and Muhyiddin's new party, Pribumi Bersatu. This new mix is, however,

fragile. Can Mahathir or Muhyiddin be the new de facto chief of the opposition that is still loyal to Anwar as its spiritual leader? Or will they all rally around Anwar?

It is within this state of flux in both ruling and opposition coalitions that the Mahathir-Anwar handshake of 5 September should be seen. Both know they are rushing against time. If there is any lawful change to be made, it must be done through the general election. The signs are that Najib may hasten the next GE to capitalise on the opposition's disarray. He might call a snap poll next year instead of waiting till the full term in 2018. It takes time for the opposition to rebuild itself – what more one that has been badly split.

Ever the wily political animal, the single-minded Mahathir saw the solution now in a new *modus vivendi* with his former protégé. Anwar, ever the embracing politician, signalled his willingness to go forward and “engage” Mahathir. A new page in opposition politics, and perhaps the broader Malaysian politics, is being drafted, or is it?

Big Challenge Ahead: Re-engineering the System

The big task ahead for both Mahathir and Anwar, however transcends everyone. The political system as a whole needs more than reform. It needs re-engineering. UMNO as the political core, even insiders agree, needs a shake-up to root out deep-seated corruption, but can any leader do it when UMNO has proven to be impervious to change and reform?

Three high-ranking UMNO leaders – Anwar, Mahathir and Muhyiddin – are now out of the party to bring about change from the outside. This is as ironic as it is telling. The alternative political template – the Opposition – is proving to have its own albatross around its neck. It seems an elusive journey to become the government-in-waiting. If a two-coalition system in Malaysia is unworkable, could there be a new political paradigm? Interestingly, some maverick UMNO leaders, such as Rais Yatim, are already thinking of bringing together both sides of the political divide.

If Mahathir and Anwar succeed in forging a new alliance to challenge BN at the coming GE, they will still need to prove this new alliance can win. Assuming they do and throw BN and Najib out of power, Mahathir and Anwar will still have to bring about real political change. What that will be remains uncharted, but they are clearly disturbed by the legacy that may be left behind for the next generation.

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