

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.

Malaysia Election Looms: Opposition Forces in Power Play

By Joseph Chin Yong Liow

Synopsis

Intriguing coalition manoeuvres are taking shape in the opposition camp in Malaysia amid talk of an early general election.

Commentary

MALAYSIA'S GENERAL election is not due until August next year. But the fact that UMNO (the United Malays National Organisation) branch and divisional meetings have been brought forward to this year has prompted speculation that Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak may call the election later this year. This would allow the incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition to capitalise on the anticipated celebratory mood come August, when Malaysia celebrates 60 years of independence.

However, there are also factors that mitigate against prospects for an early election. Malaysia watchers would be quick to point out that in 2013, Prime Minister Najib waited until the eleventh hour to request the dissolution of Parliament (by the Yang Di Pertuan Agong or King), paving the way for the 13th General Election. The forecast for the Malaysian economy this year is also hardly rosy: the value of the ringgit continues to plummet, US dollar-denominated exports are slowing down, and foreign bank lending has contracted in the wake of the 1MDB crisis.

Opposition Coalition Moves

Even so, rumours of an early election have spurred the opposition into action.

There is talk of a potential alliance between Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, or Bersatu, the new political party comprising disgruntled former UMNO members led

by the nonagenarian former prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and PAS, the Islamist party, that has captured the headlines. Should a Bersatu-PAS alliance materialise, its significance should not be dismissed, especially given recent strains in PAS' relationship with erstwhile political allies in the opposition movement, and its flirtation with UMNO.

It is ironic that as supposed fundamentalist Islamists, PAS has, in fact, been a member, either directly or indirectly, of every political alliance that has existed in the country since 1957. Indeed, it was once involved in an ill-fated union with UMNO from 1973 to 1978 under the BN umbrella. Despite that falling out, PAS continues to cultivate links with UMNO.

This time, the prospect of UMNO-PAS collaboration is being pursued ostensibly in the name of Malay-Muslim unity. This now finds expression in UMNO's support for PAS' call for review of the Malaysian Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act of 1965, the pet agenda of the conservative president of PAS, Abdul Hadi Awang. If tabled and passed when Parliament sits next month, it would pave the way for the controversial implementation of hudud (the Islamic penal code).

PAS' Twists and Turns

For the leadership of PAS, pressing the hudud agenda has served a dual purpose apart from the obvious demonstration of Islamist credentials. First, it allowed party conservatives to deliberately foment a crisis with the DAP (Democratic Action Party), an ally they deeply distrust and have always preferred to keep at a distance. Second, it also allowed the party to purge itself of progressive elements who seemed prepared to sacrifice the imperative of Malay-Muslim unity at the altar of democracy and pluralism.

PAS has succeeded on both counts. By 2015, the Pakatan Rakyat opposition coalition which united PAS with the DAP (and Parti Keadilan Rakyat as well) all but collapsed. Meanwhile, the 2015 PAS party election deepened a rift between conservatives and progressives, culminating a year later in a split which saw the progressive faction leave PAS to form Amanah, which in turn immediately aligned itself with the DAP and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR).

There was a further logic that precipitated PAS' move to side up to UMNO. PAS is not merely an Islamic social movement, but a political party that, by definition, must aspire for political power. In order to achieve this, PAS must secure seats: in state legislatures, in Parliament, and in Cabinet.

However, in the 2016 split, the breakaway Amanah faction took with them its nine parliamentary seats out of a total of 21 that PAS won in the 2013 polls. Simply put, PAS desperately needs to win at least an additional nine seats, if not more, to bolster its fading fortunes. To that end, PAS pursued prospects for collaboration with UMNO in the hope that the latter would stand aside and allow PAS candidates to contest in some UMNO strongholds, and UMNO would refrain from contesting in PAS-held seats.

For UMNO, support from PAS would allow it to further cement its hold on the rural

vote in the Malay hinterland. Yet, while each is hoping for the other to make tactical concessions on seat allocations, it remains unclear if either is prepared to do so.

Risk For UMNO

Given mounting pressure because of the 1MDB controversy and persistent rumours that the upper echelon of UMNO may not be as united as they appear, PM Najib simply cannot afford to risk antagonising the UMNO rank and file, which would almost certainly be the case if he gave up UMNO-held seats to PAS.

The cloud of uncertainty that shrouds relations with UMNO has prompted PAS to gravitate back to the opposition. Enter the latest in a long line of renegade UMNO parties, Bersatu. Its president Muhyiddin Yassin, himself a former deputy prime minister and deputy Umno president, has openly engaged PAS in discussions with an eye to an electoral pact. To lend credence to the effort, both parties have formed a working committee tasked with exploring a possible framework for collaboration.

Meanwhile, Nik Abduh Nik Aziz, conservative leader of the PAS youth wing - and who has developed a reputation as an avowed champion of the Malay-Muslim cause - raised eyebrows by making a surprise visit last week to a church in Kuala Lumpur where he engaged clergy in a cordial discussion on racial and religious harmony.

Not unlike its dalliance with UMNO, PAS' apparent interest in returning to the opposition fray appears to be governed more by pragmatism than piety. For PAS, a working relationship with Bersatu would give it access to the latter's election machinery in Johor and Kedah, two states where Bersatu is strong and PAS weak despite its numerous attempts at making inroads.

PAS could conceivably also use Bersatu as a mediator in order to keep Amanah from contesting in its traditional strongholds in Kelantan and Terengganu.

For Bersatu, the objectives are equally utilitarian - keep PAS away from UMNO while strengthening the opposition by bringing PAS back into its stable. To succeed, and given the trust deficit that exists between them, Bersatu would have to assume the challenging role of interlocutor between PAS on one hand, and the DAP and Amanah on the other. This scenario would not be dissimilar to what transpired in 1990, when PAS and DAP were held together by the UMNO offshoot of the day, Semangat '46.

Coalition-building manoeuvres currently underway in the opposition camp doubtless put forward an intriguing prospect, not least of which is the apparent reconciliation between Dr Mahathir and his former protege turned nemesis, Anwar Ibrahim, and the possibility of PAS and the DAP working together yet again, albeit indirectly.

United Mostly Over Najib?

Yet this enthusiasm barely masks the reality that the opposition is still a motley crew held together by little more than a shared desire to see PM Najib removed from power (an objective which PAS is far less enthused about) and to avoid multi-cornered fights.

Removing Mr Najib will require them to defeat UMNO, and this will be a daunting task. As the incumbent, UMNO and its Barisan allies remain in possession of a sizable war chest.

Its grip on East Malaysia also remains secure. And there is the matter of UMNO's core support base of the rural Malay vote, which has been conditioned over decades to respond to what they are told are threats - real or imagined - to their race and religion. This narrative remains a failsafe means through which the incumbent can mobilise support. To that effect, it is hardly a coincidence that controversy has been stirred over deceptively mundane matters such as the nomenclature of hot dogs, cakes served in McDonalds restaurants, and pig bristles in paint brushes.

Even if UMNO and BN can be defeated, crucial questions remain: will there be a consensus among the opposition as to who will be prime minister? What will PAS do about its hudud agenda? On what terms would a governing modus operandi be predicated, now that Bersatu has joined and PAS might return? As opposition parties strive to cobble together an understanding as the general election looms, they would do well to remember that the Malaysian political landscape is strewn with the graves of yesterday's coalitions and causes.

Joseph Chin Yong Liow is Professor of Comparative and International Politics and Dean, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This first appeared in The Straits Times.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg