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## **Sealing the Mahathir-Anwar Alliance: Will They Unseat Najib?**

*By Yang Razali Kassim*

### **Synopsis**

*One-time allies who parted ways acrimoniously, Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim have finally sealed the revival of their once effective political partnership. Their common goal of removing PM Najib Razak through the ballot box looks increasingly within reach.*

### **Commentary**

ERSTWHILE FOES Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim formally buried the hatchet for a common cause by sealing their revived alliance with a new compact to end the rule of Prime Minister Najib Razak at the ballot box. Their decision formed the bedrock of a restructured four-party opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan, which Mahathir, Anwar and Anwar's wife jointly lead. It promises a formidable line-up to challenge the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) led by Najib's UMNO in the coming general election to be called after September but before June next year.

Taking a significant step towards the grand alliance, Harapan called a joint press conference in the early hours of 14 July 2017 to announce a new leadership lineup, complete with a common logo. It was a sensitively arranged "functional leadership" of compromise and mutual accommodation by the component parties – Anwar's PKR, Mahathir's Bersatu, Lim Kit Siang's DAP and Mohamad Sabu's Amanah. Most significantly, it sealed the reconciliation between Mahathir and Anwar after their 18-year estrangement.



*Harapan's New Line-up: Anwar Ibrahim is Ketua Umum or General Chairman and "de facto leader", Mahathir Mohamad is Chairman and Wan Azizah President. Anwar is to be the eighth prime minister should the Opposition win the upcoming general election. Who is the seventh? - Malaysiakini photo*

### **Government-in-waiting?**

Anwar was declared *Ketua Umum* or General Chairman and "de facto leader" of Harapan, Mahathir as Chairman and Anwar's wife Wan Azizah as President. The posts of deputy president and vice-president were also allocated to the component parties to reflect a partnership of equals. The three deputy presidents are Bersatu's president Muhyiddin Yassin, DAP's secretary-general Lim Guan Eng, and Amanah's president Mohamad Sabu.

Significantly Mahathir also announced that Anwar will be the eighth PM after a royal pardon for him is sought by the new government to be formed after the next general election, should the Opposition win. No less attention-grabbing is that the interim seventh PM may well be Mahathir, who chaired the joint press conference flanked by Wan Azizah and the other party leaders.

Earlier Mahathir had caused a stir when he reportedly told the Guardian newspaper that he supported the jailed Anwar as prime minister, once he received a royal pardon and contested the elections. "If the Opposition win, the interim seventh prime minister will have to work to release him and seek his pardon as soon as the new government is formed."

### **How Anwar could be PM**

The official rebirth of the Mahathir-Anwar alliance that was once so effective in the 1990s and triggered major political changes, will see Anwar eventually lead, should

the grand plan work. There could be a few routes to the premiership that was once his for the taking.

Anwar could stand in a by-election in a seat to be vacated by Wan Azizah, or he could be appointed a senator on his release as a step to taking office, initially as Deputy PM. Then he would stand for election as an MP so as to qualify to be PM.

Should this eventuate, it will bring to a full circle the roller-coaster relationship between mentor and protégé. Mahathir will go down in history as making up with his heir apparent whom he sacked over controversial allegations of immorality and abuse of power – without having to apologise publicly but nevertheless taking significant steps towards reconciliation.

### **Game Changer?**

The internal tussles over the top positions, interim or otherwise, and factional rumblings have been destabilising the Opposition coalition ahead of the general election. Closing ranks in the name of a higher objective – unseating Prime Minister Najib – has become critical. The prospect of dethroning him is no longer a distant one, given the political crisis threatening Najib's position triggered by the 1MDB scandal.

Mahathir has demonstrated once again that he remains shrewd and strategic in his moves despite his advancing age. He is single-minded and has been generating much buzz as he makes game-changing steps to achieve his ultimate goal of a regime change since the outbreak of the 1MDB crisis. He said in a recent blog post that he has made a U-turn on UMNO because he has a mission to “destroy the demon” and in so doing, “found common ground with Anwar Ibrahim”.

It all began three days after 3 September 2016 – the symbolically significant 18th anniversary of Anwar's sacking as deputy premier – when Mahathir turned up in court to show support for Anwar in a case against the Najib government. It was a ground-breaking move that was never thought possible; it ended nearly two decades of bitterness that split the Malay electorate and led to a series of power shifts.

A highlight has been Mahathir joining the Anwar-led Opposition, in yet another head-turning step. Suspicion of Mahathir, however, remained deep; Najib has exploited this distrust by running down the Mahathir-Anwar reconciliation as doomed to fail from the start.

Mahathir's reluctance to express either open apology or unequivocal support for Anwar as the ultimate leader that a divided Malaysia needs has not helped. This all is about to change as Mahathir and Anwar finally sealed their revived alliance in a new power-sharing partnership that reflects their statesmanly decision to rise above party politics. The big question now is: How will Najib counter-react?

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*Yang Razali Kassim is Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An earlier version appeared in the Straits Times.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)