

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

Pakatan's Tanjung Piai Trashing: Beginning of the End?

By Yang Razali Kassim

SYNOPSIS

Pakatan Harapan's stunning defeat at the recent by-election in Tanjung Piai, Johor has sent shockwaves throughout the ruling coalition, with some even calling on Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to take responsibility and step aside.

COMMENTARY

THE STRONGEST word of caution for the defeated Pakatan Harapan (PH) in the wake of the devastating by-election setback in Johor's Tanjung Piai two weeks ago came from one of the ruling coalition's own leaders. Liew Chin Tong warned this could mark the beginning of the end of PH. "The devastating defeat is either going to be the beginning of the end of the Pakatan Harapan government as we know it or provide us with the opportunity to have a new beginning for the better," said Liew, a young leader of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) who is also deputy defence minister.

A new beginning for the rattled PH could indeed emerge from this debacle on 16 November 2019. But only if the downbeat mood now sweeping the ruling coalition is followed by an honest assessment of what went badly wrong. It's surprising that even Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his successor-in-waiting Anwar Ibrahim expressed shock at the huge margin of victory for the opposition, engineered by the new UMNO-PAS alliance. Did they not see it coming? Will PH learn from this by-election defeat, or will it be voted out – the way Barisan Nasional (BN) was at the last general election on 9 May 2018?

Why PH Lost Big Time

PH leaders told *RSIS Commentary* that they lost on two crucial fronts, a double-whammy: first, the Malay ground to the UMNO-PAS alliance, known as Muafakat Nasional (National Consensus), which was expected; second, the Chinese ground in the constituency, which deserted to the opposition, which was actually the bigger surprise.

The wide margin of defeat for PH – some 15,000 votes – suggests that the Chinese voters in the constituency have swung back to MCA, the Chinese party in the now-opposition Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. In the last general election, the Chinese overwhelmingly voted for PH, contributing to the historic downfall of the then ruling BN for the first time in six decades.

There are two important signals from this tremblor: The first is that the UMNO-PAS alliance has demonstrated its potency as a force with a winning formula. Both Malay-based parties had never worked together since 1977 when PAS was expelled from BN. If UMNO and PAS could sustain this partnership, PH will be at risk of losing power at the next general election and go down as a one-term wonder.

The second is the clear unhappiness of the Chinese ground with PH, in particular the DAP, the Chinese-dominant component party which the community voted for strongly in 2018. Once seen as the champion of the community in the face of an increasingly irrelevant MCA, the message to the DAP is that the party is proving to be as emasculated in PH as the MCA was under BN.

Power Transition and Power Struggle

While these twin signals were the over-arching messages behind the swing in Tanjung Piai, there were several factors eroding the confidence of voters in PH. Chief among them is the mismatch between expectations and reality in terms of PH's capacity to deliver; this is partly due to the number of inexperienced ministers, as a result of which cost-of-living issues did not seem to have been effectively tackled.

But hovering like a dark cloud over the ruling coalition has been the public infighting, especially in the dominant PKR. Not helping to instil confidence also is Prime Minister Mahathir's evasiveness over the timing of his political transition to Anwar, giving the impression of a potential struggle for power should Mahathir backtrack on his exit plan. Indeed, the PKR infighting and Mahathir's foot-dragging may well be linked, underscoring the broader implications for the PH coalition.

Perhaps a more accurate description of the PKR situation is an attempt at power-grab by Anwar's deputy, Azmin Ali; he is widely seen as challenging Anwar for the position of PKR president and hence successor prime minister. Azmin's latest manoeuvre was a hush-hush dinner meeting at his residence with 17 UMNO MPs and five PKR supporter MPs, two days after the Tanjung Piai defeat.

Azmin's apparent gameplan was to pre-empt a supposed attempt by Anwar to force Mahathir to step aside following the by-election defeat – which Anwar dismissed as untrue; he even posted in Facebook a picture of his warm meeting with Mahathir. By linking up with a hostile faction in UMNO, Azmin has unwittingly placed himself as “no longer an enemy of Anwar or PKR but an enemy of PH”, says an Anwar ally. Azmin's

association with the UMNO faction's bid to dethrone PH and install a "back-door government" is but a coup bid by another name.

What Next?

Azmin's "secret meeting" that was leaked in the wake of the Tanjung Piai defeat has been seen as crossing the red line. In fact, as the PH Presidential Council convened on Saturday 23 November for the Tanjung Piai post-mortem, there was much buzz that Azmin was due to be sacked. As it turned out, no such thing happened, or not just yet. Instead, two other heads in PKR rolled – for alleged corruption and bribery during the recent party election.

As at least one of them was a leader aligned to Azmin, the sacking was like a warning shot, with more to come. Mahathir is now also under pressure to reshuffle the cabinet and drop a number of under-performing ministers.

The larger backdrop, however, is the growing pressure on Mahathir himself to take responsibility for the Tanjung Piai defeat and hand-over to Anwar with a clear timeline. One date being floated is 9 May 2020 – exactly two years of PH in power. Mahathir has indicated that Malaysia is hosting the APEC Summit in November, implying that he should remain as PM at least until after the APEC Summit.

To be fair, the PH government is barely two years in office, making it a tad premature to dismiss it as having fallen short of expectations. It is too short a runway to bring about fundamental changes. Also, one swan does not a summer make; a by-election is not a general election. In a way, many of the adverse factors also seemed to have been hyped up by the opposition to undermine public confidence in PH.

Back to the Mahathir-Anwar Partnership

Going forward, what should PH do to stay in power? PH leaders say their key challenge is to rebuild the coalition's cohesion by keeping PH intact and reining in rebellions; avoid a denial syndrome; and pay heed to the protests of the voters. The over-riding expectation is for Mahathir to effect a firm and unambiguous leadership transition to Anwar.

Mahathir is certainly up to the task, given his reputation as a decisive leader. Remember 2002, when he was UMNO president and prime minister in his first tenure? He stunned the whole country with a bombshell that he was stepping down with immediate effect, after 22 years – only to delay it for a year, on appeal by UMNO leaders.

A towering figure in his own right, Mahathir should cement his pivotal leadership with a glowing closure to his legacy. If need be, his successor could still tap his vast experience and standing by retaining him as an advisor of sorts in his final lap. A stabilising Mahathir-Anwar partnership – this is the real winning formula the country badly needs.

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

Nanyang Technological University

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