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The State of The UMNO-PH Union

By Shahril Hamdan

SYNOPSIS

With the passage of time, Malaysia's post-election coalition looks like it is being normalised by all key parties in government. However, the stakes in this novel experiment in Malaysian democracy are much different for each coalition government member. For some, the downside risks are marginal and manageable. For others, obscurity awaits if the wager fails to deliver.

COMMENTARY

If a week is an eternity in politics, then a few months can just about remake the terrain. This is especially true for Malaysia these days.

It is now over 100 days since Anwar Ibrahim took the reins of Putrajaya with no small help from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and especially its President, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. Where there was turmoil and talk of an "unholy alliance" in the days after the 15th General Election (GE15) on 19 November 2022 that brought about a hung Parliament, and despite some in the parties' middle management throwing the occasional pot-shot at one another, there is now open and active cooperation between Barisan Nasional (BN), which UMNO dominates, and Anwar's Pakatan Harapan (PH).

Strengthening Union

The formation of the 'Unity Government Secretariat', chaired by Anwar himself, is instructive of the new reality where UMNO and PH really want to get along. Behind closed doors, representatives of the parties making up the coalition government – including Borneo-based Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS), Warisan, and Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) – hash out issues among one another, plan and plot against their mutual opponents Perikatan Nasional, and present a united front for the cameras.

Concrete outcomes notwithstanding, the secretariat's mere existence speaks volumes.

Incidentally, the significance of locating this secretariat inside UMNO's own headquarters in Kuala Lumpur is not lost on a wily operator like Anwar or his allies in PH, not least DAP. The Prime Minister, more than most, knows that when trying to forge a new reality and a new peace, how things look are almost as important as how things are. He sits at the head of the table, but that table is in UMNO's building, not that of his party, the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). He acquiesced to this. One wonders if he suggested it.

More tangible are actions like changes in state governments' composition – especially those controlled by either BN (read: UMNO) or PH. Where once, one side was government and the other opposition, now the two are one, mirroring the relationship at the federal level. State cabinet appointments reflect this new arrangement.

Even more significant is the commitment to avoid contesting the same seats for the upcoming six state elections in Peninsular Malaysia. If one were trying to normalise a novel arrangement, nothing beats going into battle as one team, or at least something close to it.

All this is to point out how quickly things continue to move in Malaysia. A few months ago, this alliance was framed as a compromise. That was already a lot to take in. Now, it is attempting to fashion itself as a deliberate political union.

Managing Challenges of Union

Yet, this normalisation is necessarily tenuous. After all, the whole affair still has at its core two erstwhile traditional opponents making the conscious choice to not only prop up, but get ever closer to, one another.

Moreover, the history between UMNO and PH had never been friendly, nor without deep lacing with identity politics. Over the last decade, despite internal attempts to soften its image and stand for something broader as it did in a more remote past, UMNO largely remained rooted as the nativist, and conservative, counter to DAP – and by extension, PH – vanguardism.

It is not clear that the UMNO leadership, which ironically now comprise mostly individuals at the forefront of that nativist narrative, has managed to square this apparent about-face with the Malay electorate that is its current addressable market. It is one thing to perform intellectual gymnastics with a semi-willing internal audience – its party leadership and middle management. It is quite another to convince the broader Malay community whose support is meant to be UMNO's core, and without which a question might be whispered – even among PH circles – 'What is the point of UMNO?'

Hence, the theme of differentiated risks. Unlike PH whose base among the urbane and non-Malay electorate is secure, and unlike GRS and GPS who are not national parties and whose main interests presently lie elsewhere than Putrajaya, the stakes for UMNO being in this alliance are significantly higher.

Keeping the Base Intact

To be fair, the UMNO leadership is not oblivious to these stakes. In the beginning, getting into bed with PH might have been much about factional politics within UMNO to strengthen the president's camp and weaken others seen to be less hostile to Perikatan Nasional. One is tempted to suggest it might have even been about personal redemption for the president – his personal circumstances having improved markedly. But whatever the motivations then, the same individuals are acutely aware that now, they have to prove how getting ever closer to PH benefits UMNO. Disdain for Muhyiddin Yassin's Perikatan as the resident bogeyman helps. But for the union to be sustainable, it must also make sense on its own terms.

Unlike PH who can quite simply claim to its supporters that an alliance with the old foe is a necessary price to pay for being in power – Anwar is, after all, Prime Minister – for UMNO, the case to their own supporters is less cut and dry. The party grassroots supporters are willing to let the leadership's plans play out for now, but that is different from saying they are overly enthused. They might have recently voted for (most of) the leadership, but the circumstances around those elections, the mixed results at the divisional levels, and the overhang of GE15, all suggest that it's less about batting for this political union, than about watching what comes out of it first.

A few cabinet positions or political appointments of party leaders onto statutory bodies and government-linked companies will not do. Even for UMNO, the charm of patronage politics is of limited purchase if the party is faced with an existential question, something it has never had to face before. The true test and hence, risk, is that of electability.

On that score, UMNO's calculus reads something like this: In this new grand alliance, be the Malay component that Anwar cannot do without. Using that, negotiate for good seats – including those currently held by PH – and win them in part through the gaining of non-Malay votes by virtue of being PH's ally. The logic may be circular, but there is also a quiet audacity whose architects are hoping will pay off.

The pitfalls of this wager are equally self-evident. It would require UMNO to actually have that core component locked in and not instead bleed more of it because of its alliance with PH – a scenario Perikatan is most certainly engineering by positioning itself as the new, authentic guardian. It would also require goodwill from PH to give way in mixed seats in which non-Malay votes would matter. Put another way, it requires a scenario where while chasing mixed seats by riding on PH coat-tails and hence not necessarily winning new voters on the back of its own appeal, UMNO does not sacrifice its appeal in the Malay heartlands.

Perhaps most of all, it would require party members from both UMNO and PH to actually continue wanting to work on this alliance, especially if and when things do not go well for one or both – like when a certain court decision does not go the way one might have hoped. What is at stake is not so much the stability of the government for five years – Anwar is holding his own as Prime Minister and it would take more than a few grumbings or isolated events to rock the government – but how the outcomes may diverge for the different parties in this alliance. Time will tell which truism will prove more enduring: "Friendship in good times and bad", or "Old habits die hard".

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