

Najib confirms Umno-PAS cooperation

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COMMENT The timing was uncanny, to say the least.

On the one side, you have the deputy president of PKR saying his party will continue to work with PAS; on the other, you have the president of Umno, Najib Abdul Razak taking note of encouraging signs of collaboration between his party and the Islamist one.

Thus far it has been difficult to tell PKR that continued belief in PAS being a reliable partner in unsustainable in the longer run.

In the shorter term, cooperation with PAS in administering opposition-controlled Selangor is perhaps unavoidable, but for the next general election (GE14), collaboration between PKR and PAS would be hazardous.

Why? Because PAS wants to have its cake and eat it, too.

As of yesterday, the Umno chief has confirmed that that is what PAS is up to.

Najib noted the encouraging signs of PAS' acquiescence to Umno's needs.

These were that the majority of PAS MPs did not reject the policy stage of Budget 2016; the statements of understanding and support for Najib voiced by PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang and spiritual leader Dr Haron Din; the acceptance by Hadi of the cabinet reshuffle made by Najib in late July; and Hadi's support for Najib's spurning of urgings that he resign over alleged mishandling of the 1MDB issue.

Given that the Budget 2016 encompassed the Goods and Services Tax (GST), which is broadly rejected by the opposition, including PAS, for its exactions on the middle class and the poor, and considering that the 1MDB issue is not only a national but also an international bellwether, there is little or no gap between the official Umno position and the PAS stand on the major issues of the day.

PKR, like the DAP and the new member in the opposition bloc, Parti Amanah Negara, are flatly opposed to GST and want Najib to come clean on 1MDB or else quit the premiership.

Taking into account the array of differences between the apparent PAS stand on major issues and the PKR position, the persistence of the latter in seeking common ground between the Islamist party and itself is unrealistic.

Furthermore, there appears to be no urgency on the part of PAS in tabling a motion in Parliament to amend the 1965 Syariah Offences law that limits punishments under the statute for Syariah offences.

The amendment is necessary to give bite to the changes made to a 1993 law passed by the PAS-controlled state legislature in Kelantan to introduce hudud in the state.

It was the passage of this amendment in the state legislature in March that made the breach between PAS and DAP unbridgeable in the now defunct Pakatan Rakyat.

Underlining rapprochement, underscoring gulf

The fact that all 12 Umno reps in the state assembly supported the amendment only served to underline the rapprochement between the Malay nationalist party and the Islamist one.

Correspondingly, the same amendment served to underscore the gulf between PAS and DAP that, unsurprisingly, led three months later to the breakup of Pakatan Rakyat, though PAS continued to maintain that its cooperation with PKR, especially in the running of the Selangor state government, was unaffected.

This view is sustained by Selangor Menteri Besar Azmin who is resolute in warding off pressure from DAP that the ruling coalition sever its collaboration with PAS.

But now with confirmation by the Umno supremo that the gap between Umno and PAS is narrowing, matters are crystallising to the extent that PKR cannot pretend that PAS will continue to be a reliable partner in opposition coalition politics.

True, the PKR argument that all parties in the opposition - DAP, Amanah, Parti Sosialis Malaysia, and PAS - must cooperate if they hope to dislodge Umno-BN in GE14 is irrefutable, there are legitimate questions about the actual fidelity of PAS to the opposition's reformist agenda.

PAS has gone unilateral in wanting hudud for Kelantan despite the Islamic penal code never being a plank in the Common Policy Framework of the now-expired Pakatan Rakyat.

Furthermore, the lack of urgency in PAS in tabling a motion in the Lower House to obtain the federal warrants for hudud enforcement in Kelantan raises suspicion about the motives about the whole matter.

Was the party cavorting with Umno in service of a subterranean agenda to break up Pakatan Rakyat by passing the amendments to the Syariah law in Kelantan?

This surmise and the confirmation by the Umno president that Umno-PAS cooperation is a growing reality throws the whole issue of PKR's persistence in wanting to cooperate with PAS going into GE14 into sharp relief.

A relief that ought to expose that persistence as self-defeating delusion and not Putrajaya-gaining reality.

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