

Revolt brewing in Bersatu Johor, defections to Mahathir's new party expected

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A revolt is brewing in Bersatu Johor according to sources and even party president Muhyiddin Yassin's division in Pagoh might not be safe from defections to Dr Mahathir Mohamad's new party.

Despite not even having a name yet, one Johor Bersatu senior assemblyperson told Malaysiakini there was a strong interest to join it.

"Even though the party has not been registered, the sentiment of wanting to join it, especially among Bersatu members, is quite evident," the assemblyperson said on condition of anonymity.

The source is currently aligned with the Perikatan Nasional state government.

Mahathir yesterday declared that he would be setting up a new Malay-based

party that was not aligned to either Pakatan Harapan or PN.

Previously, during the height of the "Sheraton Move" crisis, 19 out of 26 Johor Bersatu divisions had declared their support for Mahathir after Muhyiddin had reportedly greenlit a coup in the state.

It is not clear if these allegiances remain the same as Mahathir camp's state leader then, Johor Bersatu chief Mazlan Bujang, is now part of the PN state government.

Not long after PN took over the state, there were murmurs of dissent within Johor Bersatu with some leaders unhappy at being sidelined by Umno in the new state government.

A counter-coup was reportedly in the works but this was stopped by Johor's Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar who threatened to dissolve the state assembly if there was another power struggle.

Quizzed on whether the new party had sparked renewed negotiations, a Johor Harapan source said there were rumours that Bersatu assemblypersons would defect to Mahathir's party.

He said the picture would be made clearer during the Slim by-election in Perak, which will be contested by the Mahathir faction.

So far Mahathir's new party has the support of two MPs in Johor, they being Sri Gading MP Shahrudin Mohd Salleh and Simpang Renggam MP Maszlee Malik.

Muar MP Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, who had been removed from Bersatu together with Mahathir, has yet to declare whether he will be part of the new party.

When contacted, Shahrudin said he was confident that many Bersatu grassroots members in Johor would switch parties.

"About 60-70 percent of (Johor Bersatu members) will hijrah (migrate) [...] especially those members without division positions," he told Malaysiakini.

Shahrudin was formerly a deputy minister in the PN federal government and was a Muhyiddin strongman in Pagoh for more than two decades.

However, he quit as deputy works minister in June, citing a need to save Bersatu amid a split between the Mahathir and Muhyiddin.

Plea to settle differences

Now there is speculation that when a general election is called, Shahrudin will contest the Bukit Pasir state seat in Pagoh that he once held for two terms when it was known as Jorak.

"If the new party is formed, it's expected that Shahrudin will contest in Bukit Pasir," said Hanafi Mohd Taib, a former Pagoh Bersatu committee member.

Hanafi, who is still with Bersatu and now works with the Pagoh MP's office, said a majority of division members were still loyal to Muhyiddin.

However, he said that there were already some defections from the division.

"It's not expected, it has happened," he said, adding that many division members had turned up for a Bersatu Blackout event in Pagoh attended by Mukhriz Mahathir in July.

"Bersatu Blackout" was the term used by Mahathir's faction after their party memberships were revoked after sitting separately from PN lawmakers in the May 18 parliament sitting.

Hanafi, however, said that defections to the new party would not be significant enough to build a strong grassroots claiming Bersatu didn't have a strong one to begin with.

"Bersatu itself doesn't have a lot of members because the structure of the grassroots divisions is very weak. How do you split something that is already weak? How can we become stronger?" he said.

He hoped that Mahathir and Muhyiddin could settle their differences, and make Bersatu stronger instead of making it weaker.

Mahathir and Muhyiddin became rivals in February after the latter took Bersatu out of Harapan to form a new government with Umno, BN and PAS.

A wave of defections from Bersatu has already begun in the Klang Valley with two supreme council members and one Selangor assemblyperson quitting the party to join Mahathir's side.

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