

Is Anwar bluffing? Part 1
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analysis Anwar Ibrahim has once again upped the political ante by saying that Pakatan Rakyat would be ready to form the next government by Sept 16 this year. We want to analyse this announcement by asking a series of questions.

Firstly, could this be an audacious bluff? If it is a bluff, what purpose does it serve? If this is not a bluff, who are the likely crossover members of parliament (MPs)? If this is going to happen, what are the mechanics involved? Finally, will Barisan Nasional just sit back and allow this to happen?

anwar ceramah in rembau 150208 anwarWe cannot discount the fact that this could just be a strategic bluff on the part of Anwar. If he already has enough MPs in the bag, why does he not form the government now instead of waiting until later when circumstances might have changed?

One argument could be that it's because he's not yet in Parliament but more likely the reason is that it's part of a grand strategy to create a self-fulfilling prophecy, so to speak.

We believe this is a remarkably astute political move by Anwar. What this does is increase the internal disunity within the BN parties as well as the disunity amongst the respective BN component parties. Leaders in the non-Malay BN parties not only have to consider which faction they might want to align themselves with within BN but also the possibility of aligning with Anwar and Pakatan.

The constant monitoring of BN MPs by the administration might also anger some of the MPs enough that they would consider crossing over, even if they had not considered this possibility before.

It can also be a means to motivate some to cross over for fear of being left behind. It is not hard to imagine Anwar approaching a party in Sarawak and saying that he already has 20 MPs in the bag from Sabah and that those in Sarawak will be left out if they do not cross over. He can then repeat that same line to political parties in Sabah. Like we said, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Of course, this bluff could potentially have one negative consequence for Anwar, which is that all this talk might prompt the BN to quickly pass an anti-hopping law of some kind. It's possible that such a law could be passed in a similar fashion to the Election Acts which does not require a two-thirds majority. If the BN does call Anwar's bluff in this manner, it might prompt Anwar to quickly move to replace the current government before such a law can be passed.

Who are the potential crossover MPs?

Now, who are the potential crossover MPs? Everything starts with Sabah and Sarawak which hold 55 of the 140 parliamentary seats belonging to the BN. Anwar cannot form a government – from the standpoint of public and political legitimacy – without getting at least a majority of BN MPs in these two states to cross over.

That Anwar choose Sept 16 as a deadline of sorts is not by accident. It is a symbolic move which is aimed at convincing parties in both these states that they will be given more power and more respect under a Pakatan-led administration.

But getting the Sabah and Sarawak MPs and parties to cross over is not as easy as it sounds. Anwar might be able to entice all the non-Umno parties in Sabah and the non-PBB parties in Sarawak which would yield 27 MPs and pick up another three MPs from in Peninsular Malaysia to make up the 30 that he needs.

But these parties will not cross over to Pakatan if they cannot also form the state governments in both these states. Umno in Sabah currently holds 32 out of 60 state seats. PBB in Sarawak currently holds 35 out of 71 state seats. It is hard to imagine the other parties being able to form state governments without at least some crossovers from either Umno in Sabah or PBB in Sarawak – both of which are staunchly pro-BN. So, this will not be easy.

The other question in regard to Sabah and Sarawak is what incentives Anwar can give to these parties in exchange for crossing over. Additional cabinet positions is an obvious answer. An additional boost in petroleum royalties, from the current 5% to 20% has been mentioned.

This would certainly seem attractive to both Sabah and Sarawak state governments since there is the perception that the federal government takes more from these states than it gives back. Still, it is not a given that these parties will crossover to Pakatan so easily.

But let's assume that Anwar manages to pull off this amazing coup, how will this transfer of power likely take place?

One option is for Pakatan to call for a vote of no confidence in Parliament and get the 30 or so crossover MPs to vote for this motion which will lead to the collapse of the BN government. This is a highly risky move since it's possible that some of these MPs might in the last minute renege on their promise to cross over.

He is more likely to ask these parties and politicians to make a public announcement that they are going to join Pakatan. This will also give them an opportunity to explain their move to their constituents.

Lastly, how is BN likely to respond to a bloodless overthrow? We cannot discount the possibility that it might resort to taking drastic measures including declaring an emergency to prevent Pakatan from taking over. However, if Anwar can convince all the political parties and MPs in Sabah and Sarawak to cross over, the legislative support which Pakatan will then have might be enough to demoralise the BN enough to surrender power peacefully if not graciously.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, to his credit, has not shown the desire – or the stomach, some might say – to resort to heavy-handed measures to stay in power or to prevent the opposition from gaining power in the five states they currently control. If he knows that his days within Umno are numbered anyway, he might have less reason to stand in the way of a Pakatan takeover.

The situation on the ground is extremely complex and fluid but one thing is certain. Anwar has the upper hand right now and he is making all the right strategic moves. The next question which we have, which will be answered in Part 2, is whether he should quickly form

the next government, assuming that he has enough MPs who are willing to cross over.

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