

Is Anwar bluffing? Part 2
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analysis

In Part 1, we discussed the possibility and the mechanics by which Pakatan Rakyat could form the next government in the near future. In this section, we discuss whether Pakatan should form the next government so soon, assuming they can.

The first argument in favour of Pakatan forming the next government as soon as possible is that they would be able to implement political reforms faster than what Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi can possibly do.

abdullah ahmad badawi pak lah angry anwar lookSo far, Abdullah has announced many measures including reforming the way the judiciary is appointed as well as giving the Anti-Corruption Act (ACA) more teeth. But we are still unsure as to whether he can implement these measures quickly. If Pakatan were to form the government in the near future, there is no doubt such reforms would be implemented sooner.

For example, we have no doubts that a Pakatan administration will free the Hindraf 5 immediately. They will also quickly move to abolish the ISA, free up the media, reform the UUCA (Universities and University Colleges Act), move more quickly on the anti-corruption front, make the Election Commission independent, introduce local council elections and so on. They would be less inhibited compared to the Barisan Nasional in making all such reforms.

The second argument in favour of Pakatan forming the next government sooner rather than later is that they can take advantage of the current disunity within the Barisan Nasional. The great uncertainty within the different BN component parties in regard to leadership issues – in Umno, MCA, MIC and Gerakan – is an opportunity for Pakatan to pick up disillusioned members of parliament from these various parties.

The third argument is that there is no guarantee that BN will not resort to using unfair tactics to ensure that the next election works even more to its favour (if Pakatan waits that long). While elections have never been free and fair in the past, it could be worse the next time around, especially if BN thinks it's going to lose. Notice that Abdullah has been conspicuously silent on reforming the Election Commission, a key institution to ensure the fairness of the electoral process.

These are good reasons why Pakatan should move sooner rather than later. But short-term gain might come with the cost of long-term pain.

Firstly, while Anwar has stated that he will not offer any monetary incentives for MPs to cross over, it's inevitable that he will have to offer something. Why else would they cross over? Now, this can be in the form of additional cabinet positions. While this may not constitute 'bribery' to many, there are costs to such backroom deals.

For example, if Anwar were to lure say the PBB to join Pakatan, he might have to make an amnesty deal promising not to probe or prosecute its leader, Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, for alleged corruption. How does that jive with Anwar's and Pakatan's anti-corruption pledge?

Secondly, Pakatan is still trying to come to terms with running five states. The many problems associated with the formation of the state governments in Perak and Selangor have been well documented. The Pakatan is also finding that its resources in terms of capable MPs and state assemblypersons are already being stretched to the limit.

If Pakatan were to form the next government in the near future, the problems which we have seen at the state level will be greatly exacerbated at the federal level. Pakatan MPs, who are just beginning to get accustomed to their new roles, will suddenly have to adjust to being part of the government, especially those MPs who will become ministers and deputy ministers and perhaps parliamentary secretaries. It is not hard to imagine a less than fully-functional Pakatan cabinet if they form the government within the next six months.

Better to wait for BN to implode

Thirdly, and most importantly, Pakatan would be forming the government at a time of great economic uncertainty both locally and globally. Pakatan would come into office after promising to lower oil prices and probably promising a greater share of oil revenue to both Sabah and Sarawak. It is hard to see Pakatan being able to carry out both these promises and at the same time ensuring that the government budget does not sink into a deep deficit.

As it is, rising oil prices are already putting a strain on government finances and rising commodity prices and shortages will continue to have a trickle-down effect on the economy. The US recession will also contribute to a global slowdown in economic growth.

In light of these factors, a Pakatan government will most likely be blamed for not being able to manage these economic challenges. Part of this will be because of global conditions which are out of their control but part of this will also be because of pre-election promises and the learning process which a new government will inevitably have to go through.

Instead of being in such a rush, why not wait it out for another year or so? The BN certainly does not look like it will be in a better position one year from now. In fact, all indications are that it will be in a worse shape.

There is likely to be political fallout from the leadership tussles in Umno and perhaps MCA, MIC and Gerakan as well. Rising oil prices, a commodity shortage and a slowing economy will likely give the already embattled government even more headaches. Pakatan would be in a better position to take over power after a BN implosion. It would also be able to justify taking economic austerity measures, saying that it inherited a failed economy from BN.

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