

The domino effect - Sabah crossovers
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Ong Kian Ming and Oon Yeoh

Speculation is rife that a number of Sabah MPs are close to crossing over to the Pakatan Rakyat. In the first of a two-part series, we will discuss the possibility and implications of such a development.

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In part two (tomorrow), we will look at the prospects of PKR president Wan Azizah becoming the PM, the possible mechanics of a Pakatan takeover and what Barisan Nasional might resort to if such an attempt is made.

We had speculated in an earlier podcast that Anwar Ibrahim would want to wait until he has more than 30 MPs in his pocket before moving to unseat the BN government. There is now a real possibility that the process might get started with several – perhaps 15 to 20 – Sabah MPs announcing their decision to join Pakatan.

The strategic purpose of such a move is to start a domino effect that begins with the Sabah MPs and then cascades over to Sarawak and finally to the rest of Peninsular Malaysia.

That these crossovers will occur is far from certain, despite the claims made by Anwar and others in the PKR camp. The Sabah MPs who are thinking about crossing over have to weigh the costs which include losing access to federal and state power, at least in the short term, until and unless Pakatan is able to take over. And of course, such an outcome is far from assured.

maximus johnity onkiliIt's hard to imagine someone like Maximus Ongkili, for example, switching over to Pakatan and giving up his position as the minister of science, technology and innovation and possibly for his party, the PBS, losing cabinet positions within the Sabah state government.

One also cannot discount the possibility that Sabah leaders are simply using this opportunity to get many concessions from the federal government. By giving the impression that they are ready to cross over to Pakatan, they could potentially secure a better deal for the future.

2008 election results for sabah and sarawak 120508But if crossovers are to occur, they would likely start in Sabah rather than in Sarawak. The loyalty of Umno leaders in Sabah is not as unshakeable as those in Peninsular Malaysia. Umno Sabah was formed after PBS left BN just prior to the 1990 general election. Indeed, Anwar was instrumental in setting up Umno Sabah and he still has some influence over there.

It's worth noting that Anifah Aman (Umno - Kimanis), who rejected the position of deputy transport minister, has made thinly-veiled remarks on changing sides. Abdul Ghapur Salleh (Umno - Kalabakan), has also expressed dissatisfaction about the lack of cabinet allocations for Sabah as well as the relative unimportance of the posts given. Mohd Shafie Apdal (Umno - Semporna), who was once domestic trade and consumer affairs minister, has been put in charge of the less important national unity, culture, arts and heritage ministry.

There is also widespread discontent in Sabah over the steady influx of illegal immigrants

from the Philippines and Indonesia who have somehow managed to obtain identity cards as well as voting rights. By promising Sabah MPs and parties more cabinet positions as well as more prominent positions, by offering a larger share of the oil royalty and by clamping down on illegal immigrants, one could envision Anwar could entice perhaps 15 to 20 Sabah MPs to cross over, if not more.

Sarawak, by comparison, is a harder nut to crack because of Anwar's limited influence over there and also because of Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud's iron grip on that state.

High-stakes game by Anwar

This is a high-stakes game which Anwar is asking the Sabah MPs to play, especially those first few who are expected to cross over. He is essentially asking them to put their political careers on the line because if Pakatan fails to form the next government, they will be in political limbo with little hope of getting re-elected in the next general election.

anwar ibrahim and pkr speech
In short, Anwar is asking them to be the first dominos within the ruling BN to fall in the hope that this will inspire others to make a similar move, firstly in Sabah and then later in Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia. By creating momentum against the BN, he is hoping that everyone will view the Pakatan takeover as inevitable.

Perhaps, Anwar feels that he has no other choice given that he does not yet have the 40 to 50 MPs that he needs to form a strong government. In attempting to create a domino effect, he might actually spook the BN into doing something drastic to stop this from happening. But having suffered six years in jail and after going through what he has gone through, Anwar is ready and willing to play this high stakes game. In fact, he's already started.

ONG KIAN MING is a PhD candidate in political science at Duke University and OON YEOH is a writer and new media analyst. You can listen to both of them discuss this topic in their Realpolitik podcast.

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