

PAS-Umno talks: Why the rumours won't go away
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Ong Kian Ming and Oon Yeoh

Talks of a Barisan Nasional component party or members of parliament switching camps to Pakatan Rakyat makes its rounds every few days. Another rumour which has been in circulation but out of the media spotlight has been the continuing Malay unity talks between Umno and PAS.

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We've already discussed this issue in a previous podcast in which we argued that it was not in PAS' interest to cooperate with Umno. Shortly after the publication of our article, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang announced the suspension of future talks with Umno. But still, the rumours persist that at least some members and leaders within PAS continue to be interested in cooperating with Umno and are now aggressively pushing for it.

It's not hard to understand why. Some of them believe that PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim has 'sidelined' them and even taken PAS for granted. No doubt, PKR is now the largest opposition party. But PAS is no small potatoes. It was the largest opposition party as recent as 1999 and was the only opposition party before 2008 to have run a state government.

From an institutional strength standpoint, PAS is definitely a stronger party with a much more extensive grassroots network compared to PKR. Yet, it has had to play second fiddle to PKR.

pakatan rakyat mp parliament dinner 290408 04In other words, PAS feels that it is getting short shrift from Anwar. To make matters worse, its position with Pakatan is likely to erode if Anwar manages to form the next government with the help of defections from Sabah and Sarawak MPs, many of whom are not Malays or Muslim.

For these leaders, the option of working with their co-religionists from Umno may be more appealing than playing third or fourth fiddle under an Anwar-led government.

It takes two hands to clap and PAS is not the only one involved in this. Umno, in its efforts to undermine any possible moves by what Anwar has up his sleeve, is doing exactly what Anwar is doing – which is encouraging crossovers, from PAS, that is. It is reaching out to disgruntled PAS leaders perhaps with promises of power and positions to entice them into the BN fold.

It is worth asking why DAP isn't in a similar position to be 'enticed' by the BN. Firstly, it already has its hands full trying to run the government in Penang and it also has important responsibilities in the state governments of Perak and Selangor. Furthermore, DAP would not be too concerned about the influx of non-Malay, non-Muslim bumiputera MPs from East Malaysia.

Serious negative repercussions

While the notion of being third or fourth fiddle under a Pakatan government might not seem attractive to PAS, the leaders who are considering working with Umno should think twice or

maybe even thrice about the many negative implications arising from such a move. There are serious negative repercussions if they actually team up with Umno.

Firstly, PAS would immediately and dramatically lose all support of the non-Malays who voted for them in the recent election. The hard work of many PAS MPs like Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad (Kuala Selangor) in making inroads into the non-Malay community would all go down the drain. The backlash would not just come from the non-Malays but amongst its grassroots as well, who view Umno as their traditional enemy.

pakatan rakyat mp parliament dinner 290408 05Secondly, PAS would still have to play second fiddle to Umno in any kind of formal coalition arrangement. It has always seen itself as the playing the main opposition role in the predominantly Malay states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang. It currently runs the government in two of these states – Kedah and Kelantan – and has run the state of Terengganu as recently as 1999.

Would it want to play junior partner to Umno in these states, especially when it can more or less run these states on their own if they can defeat Umno at the polls?

Thirdly, PAS must realise that if it joins the BN, there would be a strong reaction from MCA, Gerakan and MIC, who might even end up quitting the coalition in protest. It's hard enough that they have to swallow the bullying behaviour of a dominant Malay party in the form of Umno, it's quite another to have to kowtow to PAS as well.

pas pkr dap pc barisan rakyat coalition 010408 05Imagine the irony of the following scenario: The non-Malay parties of BN quit the coalition in protest against PAS' admission into the fold. And Anwar manages to get a substantial number of East Malaysian MPs to cross over. PAS would then suddenly find itself in an opposition coalition with Umno!

From what our sources tell us, although the Malay unity camp within PAS is gaining momentum, they are still a minority. While we do not want to name those who are said to be in this camp, we are comfortable with highlight two PAS leaders who are vehemently against any cooperation with Umno - they are Tok Guru himself, Nik Aziz Nik Mat and Husam Musa.

They are a powerful force as one represents the old guard while the other represents the future of the party. Given the prominence of these two leaders within PAS, it would be unlikely that the minority advocating a stronger working relationship with Umno would be able to prevail.

Still, this is not something to be taken lightly and Anwar would do well to treat these rumours seriously. Instead of constantly chasing after MPs from East Malaysia, he might want to consider managing some of the internal affairs within Pakatan and start assuring PAS leaders that the party's best interest would be to stay clear of Umno and remain within the Pakatan fold.

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.