

Splits in Umno and Opposition unity

by Wong Chin Huat
merdeka@thesundaily.com

HISTORICALLY, successful coalition building among political parties in Malaysia has depended very much on the splits within the dominant ruling party, Umno.

The first split in Umno which resulted in Datuk Onn Jaafar's exit and the formation of the multi-ethnic Independent of Malaya Party (IMP) in the early 1950s led directly to the Umno-MCA coalition.

The Labour Party and Parti Rakyat formed the first multiethnic opposition coalition, the Socialist Front (SF), before the 1959 elections but its support came largely from non-Malays.

The sacking of an Umno minister, Aziz Ishak, in 1962 gave the SF a third member, the National Convention Party (NCP) in the 1964 elections. It, however, was the weakest link and failed to shake Umno's ground.

The next multiethnic coalition, the Malaysian Solidarity Convention initiated by Singapore's PAP, had no Malay component and died in its infancy with the 1965 expulsion of Singapore.

The post-1969 challenge to first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman led to the brief expulsion of (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad from Umno and (now Tun) Musa Hitam from government.

In 1977, Harun Idris, the populist Selangor menteri besar was expelled from the party before he was charged and convicted for corruption. He rejected Tun Hussein Onn's offer for a dignified exit as an ambassador.

As Umno experienced rejuvenation after 1969, neither of these led to a schism or formation of new opposition parties.

Mahathir-Razaleigh Showdown

The 1987 showdown between Mahathir-Ghafar (Baba)'s Team A and (Tengku) Razaleigh (Hamzah)-Musa Hitam's Team B was the first schism which saw competition for all positions within Umno, from president to supreme council members.

The factionalism was less driven by policy difference (like "Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola" in political scientist Shamsul A.B.'s words), but more by competition for business opportunities and state largesse, which became tougher because of the 1985-86 economic recession.

The formation and alignment of factions within Umno was fluid.

In 1981, with Mahathir's tacit support, Musa, who was then education minister, beat Tengku Razaleigh, then the finance minister, to become Umno deputy president.

Razaleigh, who kept his cabinet post, mounted another unsuccessful challenge against Musa in 1984.

Musa then wanted Mahathir to remove Razaleigh from the cabinet but Mahathir only transferred Razaleigh to the lesser portfolio of trade and industry.

Musa read this and Mahathir's

grooming of Anwar Ibrahim beginning in 1982, as the president's deliberate tactic to check his power and later, he resigned from government in February 1986. To defend his Umno deputy presidency, Musa soon teamed up with his erstwhile archrival Razaleigh who took on Mahathir.

The "battle royal" or "war of the giants" ended in wafer-thin victories for Mahathir (761 to 718) and Ghafar Baba (739 to 699). Many believed Datuk Seri Najib Razak's swing to Team A at the eleventh hour overturned the results. Mahathir purged all Team B frontbenchers in the immediate cabinet reshuffle that followed.

The winners-take-all move tore the party further apart and many expected a renewed challenge from Razaleigh and Musa in the following party election scheduled for 1990.

Umno Baru and S46

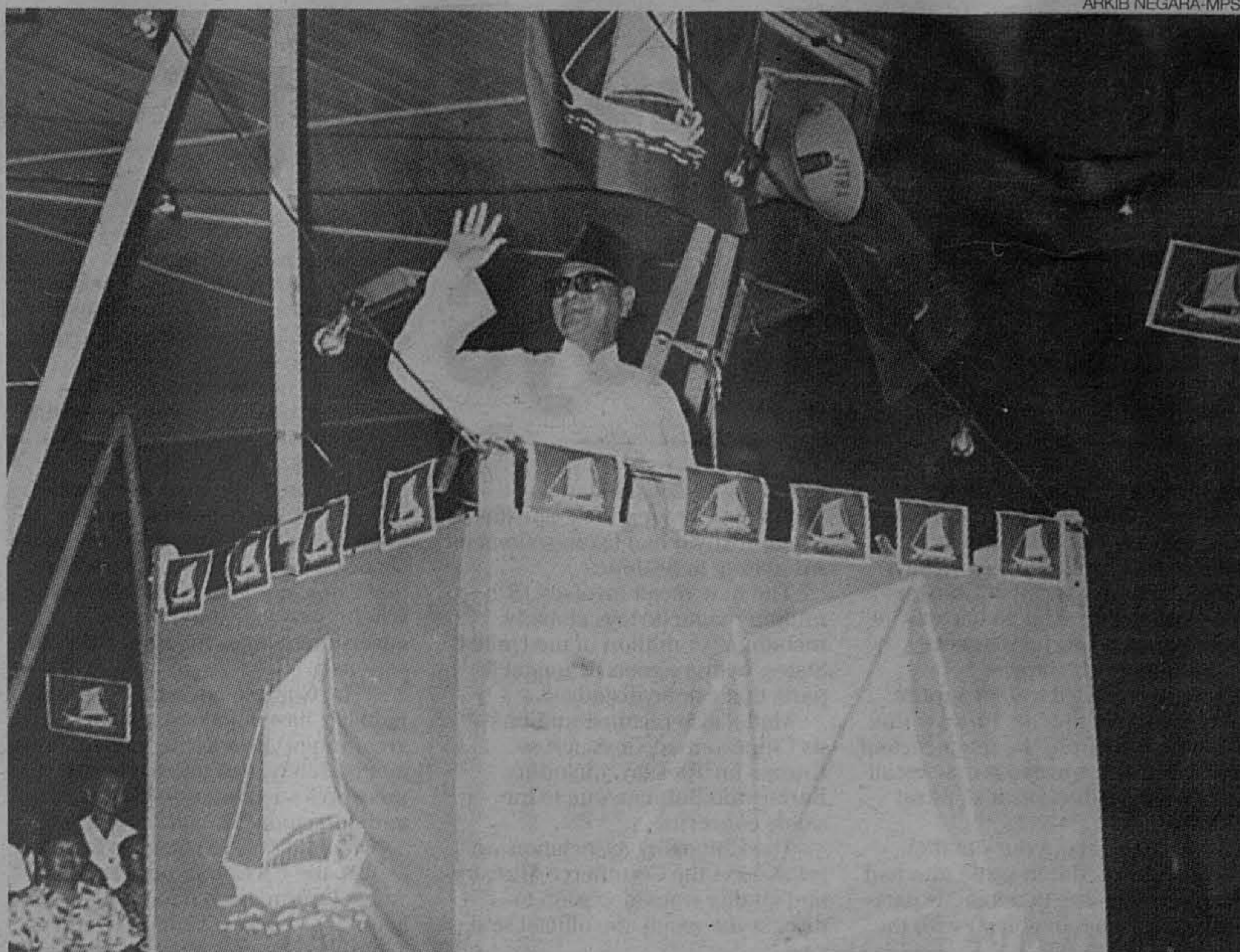
However, the High Court, based on a literal interpretation of the Societies Act, ruled in June 1987 that Umno was an illegal body due to election irregularities in a branch.

Mahathir, who had the power as Home Minister to exempt any party from the Act, chose to respect judicial independence.

A competition to form a successor party to Umno and to inherit its tangible and intangible assets began. On technical grounds, the Home Ministry rejected Team B's application for Umno Malaysia and approved Team A's for Umno Baru.

Being the game's referee, Mahathir won the first round.

Team B's hope that the High Court decision might be overturned in the Supreme Court was crushed in May and June the following year when



Tunku Abdul Rahman campaigns in the first parliamentary general elections in 1959 under the Alliance Party, or Parti Perikatan. The Alliance later formed the National Front or Barisan Nasional in 1973. The party, with the sailboat symbol, had landslide victories in the 1959 and 1964 general elections. It has remained in power since Independence.

the Lord President, Tun Salleh Abas, and two other Supreme Court judges were impeached on charges of misconduct.

Just three days after Salleh's impeachment was executed, the Supreme Court upheld the High Court's judgment. Mahathir won the second round.

Mahathir's opponents would have to fight him and Umno Baru in the ultimate arena, the general elections. Musa's faction chose to join Mahathir's new party while Razaleigh's faction formed a new party of their own, *Semangat 46* (Spirit of 46 or S46), named after the year Umno was founded.

Outside Umno, meanwhile, discontentment was growing over the incidence of corruption, power abuse and violations of democracy and human rights. To eliminate these challenges from outside the party in the midst of the power struggle within Umno, Mahathir used the Internal Security Act (ISA) to detain

more than 100 social and political leaders in the notorious *Operasi Lalang* in October, 1987.

The emergence of S46 under Tengku Razaleigh provided just what was needed to bring together the Opposition and civil society - a centrist Malay party which could be the core of a new government with a credible new prime minister.

The "two-coalition politics", mooted by civil rights and Chinese education activists as the remedy for Umno's predominance since the mid-1980s, seemed to have come of age.

While the DAP and PAS still could not sit as partners in a single coalition, they and other opposition parties formed two coalitions - the Muslim-based Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Apu) and the multireligious Gagasan Rakyat (Gagasan) - with S46 as the common member.

The 1990 elections

The message for the 1990 general election was clear: Malaysians

could now have an alternative government if they so chose. Driven by opposition against the New Economic Policy (NEP), monoculturalism and authoritarianism, and encouraged by 27 civil society leaders joining the DAP, the Chinese electorate rallied behind the Gagasan.

The alternative was so credible that Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) jumped ship after nomination day, hoping for better deals for Sabah under Razaleigh.

The Barisan Nasional (BN) lost a state government and effectively 14 out of 20 parliamentary seats overnight. According to a former S46 leader, Mahathir's wrath over this "stab in the back" deterred two more BN parties, based in Sarawak and Penang respectively, from following PBS's footsteps.

Having full control of the media, Mahathir shrewdly turned his crisis into opportunity. A photo of Razaleigh wearing a Kadazan native headgear with a cross-like design was splashed over the front pages of Malay dailies and television screens. The popular Kelantanese prince was accused of selling the Muslims to the Christian-dominated PBS.

This ethno-religious fear was too strong for Malays outside Kelantan to stomach.

S46 was completely wiped out in the west coast while the DAP failed to win more seats in the 1990 elections. Had the Opposition won enough Malay support to grab three more state seats, DAP would have ruled Penang. Eventually, PAS emerged as the greatest beneficiary with a state government in Kelantan.

Interestingly, from 1989 to 1991, the winds of change swept away some 36 one-party states worldwide, including the mighty Soviet Union.

In Malaysia, thanks to the first-past-the-post electoral system, even the unprecedented 47% support for the Opposition in 1990 translated into only 29% of parliamentary seats. Federal power was completely beyond reach.

Nothing could hold the new bedfellows in the opposition camp together for long. Unlike the fortunate Umno and MCA in 1952, they did not even have a municipal council to win.

Soon, PAS stepped up its plan for *hudud* (syariah-based criminal laws), S46 repositioned itself as a Malay champion, DAP worried about its



In better times ... former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad with Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim before Mahathir sacked his deputy unceremoniously in 1998.

Chinese support, and PBS regretted its defection from the BN.

Malay to Malaysian nationalism

The hard-won victory in 1990 for the BN however brought renewal and positive changes to the ruling coalition.

In 1991, Mahathir signified his shift from Malay nationalism to a Malaysian nationalism with the launch of Vision 2020. This was soon followed by cultural and economic liberalisation policies.

Against the backdrop of the 1990s' booming economy, these won the heart of many Malaysians, especially non-Malays.

Meanwhile, the rising Anwar and his cohorts also presented a new face of Umno which was more confident and global. All these developments resulted in slogans and terms like "Malaysia Boleh!" ("Malaysia Can!"), "Wawasan 2020" ("Vision 2020") and "Melayu Baru" ("New Malay") which flooded Malaysian consciousness.

With euphoria, the BN won handsomely with a record 65% of popular votes and 84% of parliamentary seats in 1995, the best since independence. In a Parliament enlarged by 12 seats, S46's seats shrank from nine to six, DAP's from 20 to nine, and PBS's from 14 to 8, while PAS's remained at seven.

While the Gagasan had collapsed before the 1995 elections, the Apu coalition met its end in 1996 when S46 disbanded itself to join Umno.

Emerging 25 years later after PAP's failed initiative, this attempt at a second multiethnic coalition to challenge the Umno-led one, met its end after struggling for six years.

The Asian financial crisis

The 1997 East Asian financial crisis ended the "good days" both in politics and the economy. Malaysians became more critical of how the country was run and less tolerant of corruption and cronyism.

While Mahathir blamed the crisis on a Western conspiracy spearheaded by George Soros and the International Monetary Fund to recolonise Asians, his finance minister Anwar advocated reform.

Soon, a power struggle emerged between the two, which surfaced after national day in 1998. Mahathir announced currency controls on Sept 1 and sacked Anwar the following day.

But Anwar refused to go quietly. And before long, Malaysians soon learnt from the mass media about the skeletons in Anwar's closet. At the same time, however, Malaysians also learnt of many more damaging allegations about the state from the Internet, alternative publications and political rallies.

On one hand, Anwar's purge and trial, symbolised by his blackened eye and the semen-stained mattress in court, transformed

Malaysian politics like nothing before. The legitimacy of institutions like the court, the police and the media plummeted.

While fewer senior supporters of Anwar abandoned Umno after 1998 compared to Razaleigh's followers after 1988, many middle-class and grassroots Malays took to the streets to demand justice for Anwar, and Mahathir's reputation as a respected leader suffered significantly.

This unprecedented Malay rebellion on the ground brought all the major opposition parties - PAS, DAP, Parti Rakyat Malaysia and the newborn Keadilan - into a single coalition dubbed the Barisan Alternatif (BA) which eventually won 42 parliamentary seats and two state governments in 1999.

On the other hand, however, the *reformasi* failed to change electoral and party politics. Firstly, the united opposition actually won only 43% of votes and 23% of seats in 1999. They were further away from federal power compared to 1990 when the opposition won 47% of votes and 29% of seats.

Secondly, the coalition effectively disintegrated in 2001 when the DAP left the BA, not unlike in the aftermath of 1990.

And thirdly, the divided opposition parties won only 36% of votes and 9% of seats in the following elections in 2004, no better than the 35% of votes and 16% of seats they won in 1995.

Malaysian politics had just come full circle.

Anwar is now free and demanding for the removal of the preferential policy for bumiputras, an agenda bolder than Razaleigh's "Save Malaysia" campaign or even Onn's proposal to open Umno up to non-Malays.

But many, especially non-Malays, doubt Anwar's commitment. They worry that he might be another Razaleigh who will eventually return to Umno.

They, however, may not have any other choice if they want a united opposition front or a different government in the long run.

Because of Umno's dominance, any realistic alternative to Umno-led governments would need ex-Umno politicians. Should Anwar tumble in the polls like Razaleigh or Onn, the next opposition coalition may need to wait another generation.

Wong Chin Huat is reading electoral system at University of Essex for his PhD and lectures in Arts at Monash University - Sunway Campus. He is co-editing a book on the 2004 general elections with Prof Noraini Othman at Ikmas, UKM.

Parti Keadilan Rakyat president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail with a copy of the Barisan Alternatif manifesto for the 1999 general election.

