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Dr M and the 'grand coalition'

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The driving force behind Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia is no less than the once formidable Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad but news of its formation has failed to fire up public imagination.

A DAY after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was hospitalised, a rumour went around that Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak had visited him.

It was untrue, of course. The fallout between them has been too epic for such social niceties. Another rumour had it that it was more than a "chest infection" and that Dr Mahathir had suffered another heart attack.

That was also untrue. The man is unwell but he is certainly not as ill as some people imagine because, on Thursday, he fired off another zinger in his *chedet* blog, challenging Najib to a debate before a live audience and to be telecast live.

It was a delayed response to an interview that the Prime Minister gave to a TV station in Jakarta where he said the attacks against him began because he refused to run the government the way the former Premier wanted. He also described Dr Mahathir as being obsessed with power and all that got under his skin.

Dr Mahathir has had a hectic schedule the last few weeks. He turned 91 last month and the family gathered in Phuket for the occasion. Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali celebrated her 90th birthday a couple of days after that.

A week later, the former first lady launched her memoirs, *My Name is Hasmah*. More recently, the couple celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary, reportedly in Japan.

It has been one sentimental milestone after another for the former Premier. At his age, every anniversary is an extraordinary occasion. But who would have thought he would be forming a new political party at this grand old age? Even the Japanese Emperor who is only 83 is talking about abdication.

On Wednesday, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin registered the new party which will be known as Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Parti Pribumi).

"We want to work towards a clean and transparent government with integrity. The whole point is to form a fair Malaysia," said Muhyiddin.

Another year, another new political party. Details of the new party are still sketchy but from what has been revealed so far, Parti Pribumi will be a Malay party that non-Malays can join as associate members.

Dr Mahathir will be the chairman, Muhyiddin the president and Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir the vice-president.

The others in the pro-tem committee include the former Umno branch chief for Teluk Kemang Kamarul Azman Habibur Rahman, two former members Ainina Saadudin from Kedah and Akhramsyah Muammar Ubaidah Sausi, and activist Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman.

Every new Malay party is a threat to existing giants like Umno and PAS and especially with a superstar



Let the games begin: There has been a rather cautious welcome from Pakatan Harapan parties to the formation of Parti Pribumi with Dr Mahathir as chairman and Muhyiddin as president. The pro-tem committee members seen here at a meeting in Dr Mahathir's house are (clockwise from left) Kamarul, Ainina, Mukhriz, Akhramsyah and Syed Saddiq.



Azmin: The Selangor Menteri Besar has dropped hints of a grand coalition in the making.

like Dr Mahathir and big names like Muhyiddin and Mukhriz at the helm.

But the line-up is not exactly impressive for a party that aims to replace Umno and especially given what Syed Saddiq told *The Star* - that his party would focus on areas where even PKR and PAS cannot penetrate.

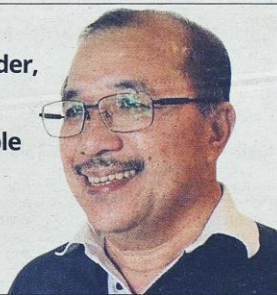
The Malay heartland seats are tough terrain. It needs foot soldiers, a network, local know-how, funds and religious credentials.

Syed Saddiq was one of the speakers during a Mahathir ceramah in a Malay village during the Sungai Besar by-election. The champion debater went on about the lack of freedom for student elections in the university and the need for democracy in the country. He had the credentials and the good looks but there was such a disconnect with the local environment.

It is apparent by now that Parti Pribumi does not intend to come under the Pakatan Harapan umbrella. The talk is that Dr Mahathir will initiate a new coalition that comprises Malay parties like PAS and the Sabah party that Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal is working on. This Malay coalition will then work with Pakatan

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Harapan to ensure one-to-one contests against Barisan Nasional.

The arrangement is necessary because PAS and DAP cannot stand each other and PAS refuses to have anything to do with Amanah. At a more personal level, Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail refuses to appear on the same stage as Dr Mahathir.

But with the dual umbrella bodies, the enemy parties can work together without appearing to do so.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah will find it rather too familiar. He had done the same thing back in 1990. The royal politician got PAS and other Islamic parties to group under Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah while more secular parties like DAP, Semangat 46 and PBS grouped under Gagasan Rakyat.

Tengku Razaleigh's brainchild did not work well except in Kelantan where Umno was toppled. It is ironic that the great Dr Mahathir is borrowing from the playbook of his long-time adversary but, as they say, imitation is the highest form of flattery.

PKR deputy president Datuk Seri Azmin Ali has been hinting of a "grand coalition" in the making and which will be able to take on Barisan Nasional.

Grand coalitions of this nature need a highly charismatic figure to pull off. Tengku Razaleigh had that and it is now Dr Mahathir's turn. But the Kelantan prince had one big advantage then - he did not have to deal with too many egomaniacs.

Still, these are early days and, who knows, the copycat version may do better than the original.

Meanwhile, Parti Pribumi ran into a wall of brickbats and derision in social media especially over its non-Malay associate membership. The party was trying to be politically correct but came across as patronising. But the result of an online poll by a *Sinar Harian* on the readers' preference helped to save the wound - Parti Pribumi got 36% of the votes, PAS 28%, Pakatan Harapan 27% and Barisan Nasional 2%.

However, the most glaring thing about Parti Pribumi so far is the lack of excitement and buzz from ordinary people.

"I grew up with Dr Mahathir as my PM, he contributed so much but a political party must be built from aspirations and hope. This party is out for revenge," said a Malay professional working in an engineering firm.

Datuk Wan Albakri Md Noor of the Terengganu Veterans group was

a one-time admirer of Muhyiddin but he is deeply disappointed with what the former Umno deputy president is doing.

"Just because he does not like the leader, he goes and forms a new party that will cooperate with people he has condemned all along. That is not the answer," he said.

The Terengganu businessman had once asked Dr Mahathir at a forum why he went around talking about fighting money politics and corruption when he tolerated it in his time as Prime Minister.

"His answer was that he had cried and pleaded but people did not listen. He said that during his time, there was only a little of it but now there is a lot. Then he called out for the next question," Wan Albakri recalled.

The 3Ms are household names but nobody really believes they are capable of bringing reform and change.

Their claim to be a party that will fight corruption also appears hollow and hypocritical to many. The general perception is that Parti Pribumi is a clone of Umno.

That is the problem when old faces with too much baggage try to start anew. They find that going down memory lane can be sentimental as well as nightmarish.

The party is also coming at a time when people are tired and disillusioned with politics.

"When I go around, I sense that people want to go about their daily life with more certainty instead of being used as pawns on a chessboard," said a Penang politician.

Muhyiddin held *tahil* prayers in Johor Baru on Friday evening in connection with the launch of Parti Pribumi. It has been a long and difficult year for Muhyiddin and it is not going to get any easier.

It was around this time last year that he used the Cheras Umno division meeting to voice his criticism of Najib and IMDB. That was the point when the split between the top two in Umno became official.

Two days later, he was axed from the Cabinet. Then came the suspension as Umno deputy president and in June this year, he was sacked from Umno.

Muhyiddin, it was said, had aspirations for the presidency of Umno after the 2013 general election and even more so after the 1MDB issue erupted. He reportedly felt that Najib should make way for him.

But he seriously underestimated Najib and the hold Najib has over Umno. Moreover, his aspirations were not matched by groundwork because you do not try to take on the top man without preparing your army and studying the ground.

Muhyiddin did not get to be the Umno president but he is now president of Parti Pribumi and he is finally his own boss. Or is he, given that Chairman Mahathir is hovering in the background?