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# More than just a handshake

The "historic handshake" was supposed to be a signal of bigger things to come but the mixed reaction seems to suggest that it was missing the wow-factor. *The Star - 11/9/2016*

THEY used to detest each other and have called each other some pretty awful names.

But on Monday, the nasty history between Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad seemed a thing of the past as the pair put on big smiles, shook hands and made small talk.

They had not met since the day Dr Mahathir sacked Anwar from the government after accusing him of corruption and immoral behaviour.

The encounter which took place in a crowded courtroom in Kuala Lumpur has been hailed as the "historic handshake".

It took quite a bit of planning on the part of the mastermind and PKR deputy president Datuk Seri Azmin Ali and only a small circle of people knew about it. One of them was PKR politician Najwan Hulaimi, an engineer who used to be Anwar's former special officer and who is now in the Azmin circle.

Najwan was the only person who managed to snap a picture of the handshake with his hand-phone. He put it up on Twitter, it went viral and was picked up by the local media and foreign news agencies.

Najwan was seated behind Azmin and Dr Mahathir as they chatted and waited for Anwar to arrive. He could not quite make out what they were talking about but he noted that Azmin addressed Dr Mahathir as "Uncle" throughout the conversation and that was when he realised how close they were.

But all conversation came to a stop when Anwar was escorted into the courtroom and there was an awkward moment as the former adversaries locked eyes. There was no script for this. It was a situation that few thought would ever happen.

As people whipped out their hand-phones to record the moment, Anwar moved towards Dr Mahathir who stood up to greet him. They exchanged how-are-you's while flashing their widest and handsomest smiles amid chants of "Reformasi!" and "Bebas Anwar!"

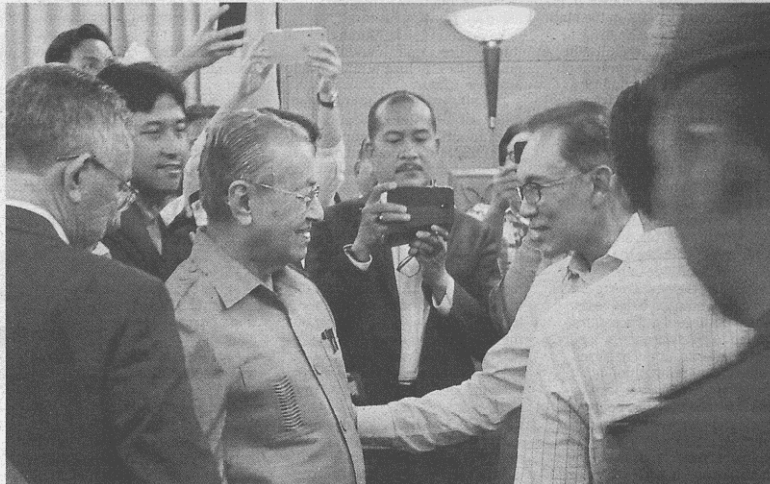
After several minutes, Azmin ushered them into an adjacent room where they were joined by Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and Nurul Izzah Anwar.

PKR supporters who still dislike Dr Mahathir claimed he had "come crawling to us" and saw it as a "big victory" for the party.

The "Pharaoh", as they used to call the elder man, was finally eating humble pie in seeking out the support of the man whom he had put in jail.

The hook-up has been portrayed as Dr Mahathir lending his clout to Anwar's legal bid to stop the National Security Council Act but they were not fooling anyone. Just five months ago, Dr Mahathir was still going on about Anwar's immoral behaviour and now they are about to become BFFs.

Dr Mahathir is an old hand at the game. He has tried one thing



**Some 18 years later:** The meeting of Dr Mahathir and Anwar was seen by some as a move to unite two statesmen but as a betrayal by others. Najwan, (behind Dr Mahathir, second from left) was the only person who managed to get a shot of the two former enemies shaking hands.



**Azmin:** Mastermind who brought the two adversaries together.



**Khairy:** Cautioned Umno not to take the hook-up too lightly



**Khaw:** Important channel of communication has been opened.



**Tawfik:** Highly cynical about Dr Mahathir's U-turn on Anwar.

after another and coupling with Anwar is the latest in his adventure to oust Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

Najib has been quite unshakable after the big wins in Sarawak and the twin by-elections. The Prime Minister is on a winning streak and this move was to disrupt his momentum.

Najwan had tweeted: "Pertemuan bersejarah. Politik ternyata satu serba mungkin" (Historic meeting, politics the art of the possible).

The news portal *Free Malaysia Today* slammed it as "the insanity of the times we live in" but it was basically realpolitik at play - going for what is attainable rather than what is right or the best.

The next big handshake will probably be between Anwar and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

The big question now is, what next after the "historic handshake"?

No one could quite predict what lies ahead although some in PKR have hinted of a political deal between the two parties.

"I suppose some form of cooperation will come out of it. It's still early days, they will need to iron out their differences but the channel of communication has been

opened," said lawyer Khaw Veon Szu.

Umno has every reason to be worried and is watching closely even though its leaders have run down the meeting as, among other things, a "Bollywood drama" and the act of a desperado.

Many in Umno see it as the ultimate U-turn by Dr Mahathir. They went against public opinion to prop up Dr Mahathir when he sacked Anwar and now they feel played out. They feel that he has taken them for a ride.

"I can't help but be cynical. He led a movement of hate against one man. He got people to commit their soul to his cause and now he is saying everything is alright. I'm not sure how those who have been with Anwar since 1998, who have been victims of Mahathir's venom, will feel about the handshake," said Tawfik Ismail, a former Umno MP and son of the late deputy prime minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman.

However, Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin is not taking it lightly.

He has urged his party to keep a close eye on the development and to be on the alert for any eventualities.

Like many astute politicians,

Khairy recognised the significance of the Anwar-Mahathir handshake.

But the event has, by and large, gone over the heads of ordinary people. There was a bit of a stir but there was no sustained interest and it flattened out after a couple of days.

Had this taken place three or four years ago, it would have caused a crazy euphoria.

"The impact of these two ageing gladiators is no longer the same. It was supposed to be a titanic moment but they have been overtaken by events and the Generation Y and millennials don't see it as a big deal," said a former political adviser to Anwar.

It was also another indication of the dwindling influence of the former prime minister. The man whom his Cabinet once nicknamed "Tok Bomoh" seems to have lost his magic touch.

His Citizens' Declaration campaign has fizzled out and his new Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia received a lukewarm welcome but it has received the green light from the Registrar of Societies.

There has also been a deafening silence on the part of DAP leaders including Lim Kit Siang whose full-time occupation is to comment on everything under the sun.

According to a Penang DAP politician, there have been no cues from the senior party leaders unlike during the Citizens' Declaration campaign when Lim urged people in his party to give their full support so as to punch a hole in Najib's defence.

"The wow-factor was not there, I do not see any multiplier effect but I don't want to write it off. I still hope it will lead to something bigger," said the DAP politician.

It is likely that DAP has learnt from its earlier collaboration with Dr Mahathir. The Chinese intelligentsia was very critical of Lim's leading role alongside Dr Mahathir in the Citizens' Declaration campaign.

The fact that the campaign went nowhere also caused Lim to lose face and reflected on his poor judgement and what some see as his ivory tower view of society.

Moreover, DAP leaders are starting to see Dr Mahathir in a more realistic light after his failure to deliver the Malay vote in the Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar by-elections.

"Middle Malaysia is still on a wait-and-see stand. They are not against it, they like the idea of having a check and balance but they have spent too many years under Mahathir," said Khaw.

The Chinese community, he said, has deep reservations about Dr Mahathir.

"The average Chinese does not trust him, they blame him for many issues in Chinese education. To them, the genesis of problems like excesses, corruption, nepotism and the rise of radical Islam took root under his watch," said Khaw.

His authoritarian style at the height of his power was accepted by many conservative Chinese but this is a different generation and era.

Besides, the Chinese are pragmatic people and, no matter how much they may dislike Najib, it does not make sense to invest in a 91-year-old man with a history of heart problems.

It would be folly to brush off the coming together of these two former foes as a small matter. Together, they become a bigger enemy of Umno.

At the same time, it is increasingly clear that Dr Mahathir is no longer the opinion-shaper that he once was. People feel that his campaign of change is driven by hate and not by hope and aspiration. He represents the past and not the future.

So much of the politics of the last decade has been propelled by hatred towards Umno. The opposition parties gained ground riding on this sentiment.

Yet, the opposition is now being spearheaded by some of the biggest ex-Umno guns.

It is so ironic and contradictory and it is little wonder that many, especially the younger generation, are not inspired, excited or even interested in what they see as old politics driven by old faces.

The political fatigue is for real and it is getting worse.