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A big play for the Malay vote

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Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak may be inching towards that elusive feel-good factor while Pakatan Harapan is still struggling to sort out its partnership issues.

POLITICIANS on this side of the Malacca Straits have been transfixed on the trial of Ahok in Jakarta.

The blasphemy trial of Ahok, as the Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama is widely known by, has gripped audiences in neighbouring countries which have a significant Muslim population.

Ahok is the highest-ranking Indonesian official ever charged with insulting a religion in Indonesia and the Islamists groups had held mass demonstrations against him. Add to that the fact that he is a Christian Chinese and an ally of President Joko Widodo and one can see why it is such a riveting issue.

When Ahok was elected Governor of Jakarta two years ago, many Malaysians especially those of Chinese descent had hailed Indonesia as a beacon of tolerance and progressiveness while running down Malaysia as intolerant and discriminatory.

The same people now seem strangely silent, unsure what to make of his reversal of fortune.

According to KRA political risk analyst Amir Fareed Rahim, the Ahok debacle is as much about religion as it is about a political power play surrounding the gubernatorial election in February and the presidential polls further down the road.

It is also very much about class issues and anti-Chinese sentiments. The anti-Chinese mood at the height of the demonstrations was so real that the *Sin Chew Daily* correspondent in Jakarta moved out of his rented house and checked into a hotel on the outskirts of the capital.

Race, religion and politics – there is no escaping it, whether in America, Europe, Indonesia and, of course, Malaysia.

Non-Muslims are struggling to wrap their heads around the Islamism they see at home and abroad.

The Muslims are going through an epochal moment in history to assert their identity, to make their voices heard and to tell the world that they will not compromise on their beliefs.

PAS is planning a big gathering in February next year to rally support for its Private Members' Bill ahead of the new session of Parliament in March.

Proponents of the Bill say it is necessary for a higher quality of Syariah judges and to increase penalties for the court. But opponents of the act have criticised it as unconstitutional and see it as a step towards hudud law.

There are shades of what is going on in Indonesia happening on our shores, with Muslim politicians telling non-Muslims not to comment on Islam or oppose laws that are meant for Muslims.

A Muslim NGO recently said that, "in Malaysia, there are hundreds of Ahok's," the implication being that too many non-Muslims are commenting on Islam.



Shifting sands: Najib and PAS president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang came together for the Rohingya cause while the body language between Dr Mahathir and DAP's Lim Kit Siang was positively cosy during the Amanah convention.



Tuan Ibrahim: 'PAS is not interested in working with parties which hit out at it'.



Amir: The message coming out is that Islamic issues can energise the ground.



Roslan: 'We can accept PKR but Amanah has betrayed our Islamic struggle'.

"At the end of the day, one clear message coming out is that Islamic issues can energise the ground. It's an emotional thing, it touches on nerves and it moves people. If you are not sure, steer clear from using Quranic verses, it's very sensitive," said Amir.

PAS is asking Muslims to come out to show their support. If Umno joins in, the rally could be the biggest gathering of Muslims the country has ever seen.

Top leaders of PAS and Umno have already joined hands in rallying for the Rohingya cause but the February gathering could take things to another level.

Politically speaking, the gathering will send a chilling signal to multi-racial Malaysia – that if the two biggest Muslim parties gang up (three million in Umno and 800,000 in PAS), there is little that they cannot do.

This could be the backdrop to the general election which is expected to take place next year.

The outcome of the 2013 general election was an intensified repeat of that in 2008. But with the shifting sands and changing tides, the next general election will be more difficult to predict.

The Chinese social discourse has begun to view Pakatan in a more realistic light. The Chinese intelligentsia is not thrilled with

DAP's newfound love for Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. They can also see that without PAS, Pakatan can forget about Putrajaya.

But they still dislike Umno. In short, there will be shifts here and there but no major surprises on the Chinese front.

The opinion of many political analysts is that the next general election will be about the Malay vote although none of them can confidently predict what the new Malay political landscape will look like.

There are two new Malay splinter parties in the form of Amanah and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia and there is Dr Mahathir doing what it takes to destroy the party that he led for 22 years.

But Pakatan had a break-through last week when it signed a cooperation agreement with Parti Pribumi. The coalition wanted Parti Pribumi as full-fledged partner but its president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was not keen on being the most junior partner. The compromise was an agreement to cooperate.

The arrangement also allows Muhyiddin to continue negotiating with PAS because Parti Pribumi is eyeing seats traditionally contested by PAS.

Unlike Dr Mahathir, Muhyiddin has yet to fully warm up to the

unconventional styles of Pakatan leaders. He is still adjusting from being a big fish in a big pond to being a big fish in a small pond.

His body language during the signing of the agreement was rather stiff and formal. Then again, who can blame him when Pakatan leaders keep advocating Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as the preferred Prime Minister candidate.

It is rather messy on the Pakatan side for a number of reasons.

Amanah has turned out to be a non-starter.

Amanah leaders like Datuk Husam Musa and Khalid Samad were such big stars in PAS but are unable to bring out the same wow-factor in Amanah.

The party is trying to ride on Dr Mahathir and Muhyiddin and it is quite amusing to see Amanah leaders hanging on to the two former Umno leaders and rushing to stand behind them during press conferences so that they can be in the photo frame.

Ties between the leaders of Pakatan partners are not exactly warm either. There is an undercurrent of rivalry and even resentment. During the recent Amanah national convention, the PKR-led Selangor government was chastised for favouring PAS over Amanah.

However, the most pressing issue for Pakatan is the question of PAS. DAP and Amanah do not want PAS, yet they need PAS to come along to avoid what happened in the Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar by-elections.

It is one of those supreme ironies and Muhyiddin has been tasked to slow-talk PAS.

Two nights before Muhyiddin signed the agreement with Pakatan, he joined PAS deputy president Datuk Tuan Ibrahim Puan Man at a PAS ceramah in Paya Jaras, Selangor. It was not the first time Muhyiddin was on a PAS

stage but this ceramah was supposed to signal the formation of a new opposition bloc.

Muhyiddin said his party intends to be the bridge between PAS on the one hand and Amanah and DAP on the other.

But it was a bridge too far because moments after the ceramah ended, Tuan Ibrahim told reporters that PAS could not accept any kind of cooperation with Amanah and DAP.

Tuan Ibrahim is a no-nonsense and serious-minded ulama who almost never smiles. He said PAS is not interested in working with parties who "hit out at PAS every day" and he did not take kindly to Amanah's declaration to capture Kelantan or to take on PAS in every seat.

He is also very critical of Umno and slammed the *Sarawak Report* for its accusation that PAS accepted RM90mil from Umno.

"We can accept PKR but Amanah has betrayed our Islamic struggle and DAP is our Enemy No. 1," said PAS corporate communications director Roslan Shahir.

The opposition's problem is that with Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in jail, there is no leader whom the component parties look up to.

Dr Mahathir aspires to that role but his party is too new, it does not have the numbers to call the shots and his new friends do not really trust him.

By now, Pakatan and PAS should be showcasing what they have delivered and achieved in their respective states. Instead, issues of political partnership and electoral seats continue to take centrestage.

In the meantime, their favourite target Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has his eye fixed on the end game.

Najib has just concluded a very successful Umno general assembly which showed that the party is with him and that members reject former leaders who are with DAP.

Despite the 1MDB controversy, he has made his mark on the international stage and he returned from China with a basketful of investments and a reputation as a special friend of China.

Earlier this week, Najib and his Singapore counterpart Lee Hsien Loong finalised the agreement for the High Speed Rail project between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore during which the two sons of former Prime Ministers lauded their bilateral ties.

Two days later, Najib looking relaxed and casual in a blue open-necked shirt, took an inaugural ride on the Klang Valley MRT after launching the much awaited rail service.

He is sending the signal that he can bring it on and that he is the Prime Minister that other governments want to do business with.

Is it possible that Najib could be inching towards that feel-good factor that is so important in a general election? That will certainly be better than a Malay show of numbers.