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Political undercurrents in Pakatan

The party's inaugural convention had a large audience, lots of speeches and good music during the lunch break but it ended without the big bang that top leaders had hoped for. *The Star - 13/11/2016*

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad looked dashing in red.

He has become a passionate champion of the Opposition and he was in top form as the keynote speaker at the first Pakatan Harapan convention yesterday. His new friends initially had doubts about him. They suspected his agenda and they were unsure whether he had truly cut the Umno umbilical cord.

But he seems to have sunk his heart and soul into the Opposition's cause of replacing Barisan Nasional going by his keynote address.

Dr Mahathir is pushing very hard for the Opposition to pull together so that there will only be one-to-one contests with Barisan in the general election.

And, as a number of Pakatan leaders at the packed gathering noted, he appeared much more committed to their coalition than Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

The day-long convention was supposed to have concluded on a high note with the signing of a cooperation agreement with Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia.

But Muhyiddin, who is Parti Pribumi president, had backed out from signing the agreement, pleading for more time to discuss the arrangement.

He apologised for it when it came to his turn to speak at the convention, stressing several times that his party is committed to working with Pakatan to ensure straight fights in the general election.

"He took the big bang out of the

Analysis
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inaugural gathering. It would have been great if the convention ended with a communiqué on the accord with the new party as we approach the general election. That would send a strong message to voters," said a Pakatan MP.

As a result, the gathering became the usual talking shop, one leader after another saying things everyone had heard before – running down Barisan, making fun of the Prime Minister and his wife, gloating over the shrinking ringgit, mocking the China investments and arguing the need for straight fights.

But the convention was important to show Pakatan supporters that the former prime minister and deputy prime minister are now on their side.

Few people thought they would live to hear Dr Mahathir declare his support for the Reformasi cause but he did that at the end of his keynote address, drawing huge applause. He even wore a "Free Anwar Now" button on his red shirt.

It seems like Muhyiddin is still trying to assess his new political friends. His body language is still quite formal and each time the speakers let out the Reformasi battle cry, he raised his fist to only



Trying to effect change: Dr Mahathir at the convention wearing a 'Free Anwar Now' button on his red shirt.

somewhere near his chest.

It was quite amusing to watch him hold up the "Bebas Anwar" placard that the audience had to hold above their heads when the emcee gave the signal.

On top of that, Muhyiddin had to endure all the top Pakatan leaders declaring that, "Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is still our choice for Prime Minister". It was as good as telling Muhyiddin that he is not their choice.

There are undercurrents in Pakatan. It is understood that Muhyiddin's reluctance to proceed with the cooperation agreement is because he is still talking to PAS.

The sense is that he has been una-

ble to strike a comfort level with DAP. His party is going for Malay seats and having DAP as his ally may backfire.

Muhyiddin is said to be exploring the idea of a separate Opposition coalition comprising Parti Pribumi, PKR and PAS. This will be the grand coalition that has been floated by some leaders. Pakatan is, of course, against the idea.

The grand coalition would find the Chinese-dominated DAP and Amanah in one group and the Malay-dominated parties in another bigger group.

In the event that the grand coalition does capture Putrajaya, the

Malay-dominated group will call the shots in the coalition government.

On the sidelines there was chatter among the press corps of tensions between Muhyiddin and his domineering party chairman.

Muhyiddin was not present for Dr Mahathir's keynote address.

He came later and made a point of sitting next to his deputy president Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir.

But the man to watch in all this shadow play is PKR deputy president Datuk Seri Azmin Ali who side-stepped questions from the media about a second Opposition coalition, saying that negotiations with PAS is still on.

The Selangor Mentri Besar was supposed to have left on an official visit to Mexico yesterday but he decided not to go. Some claimed he wanted to be around for Dr Mahathir at the convention and they did strike a companionable picture as they sat together.

However, Azmin told reporters he cancelled his overseas trip to be there for his mother who has been hospitalised for a stroke and who had to undergo another operation on Friday.

PAS has said that it will work with PKR and Parti Pribumi but draws the line when it comes to Amanah and DAP. The grand coalition sounds implausible for now but it is not impossible.

Muhyiddin's party has brought hope to the Opposition but he has also made things complicated for them.