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Malay hearts and minds the coveted prize for Dr M's new party

The formation of a new party led by former premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad adds a generous dash of spice to the cooking pot of national politics, which is showing signs of coming to a rapid boil.

Even at his advanced age, Mahathir, 91, continues to cast a long shadow over national affairs, and his bumiputera-centric new vehicle, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu for short), has evoked strong responses from leaders in both the government and opposition ranks.

But their biting criticisms only confirm that game-changing scenarios could potentially play out around the new entity.

In vintage Mahathir style, the doughty tactician has kept his focus firmly on his current opponent, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, whom he insists should step down.

Predictably, the unpredictable Mahathir's latest gambit has taken the fight for power right into the wolf's lair — the Malay heartland that has been the foundation of Umno's political dominance for six decades and simultaneously, the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, the putative "fixed deposit" states that ensure that the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition remains in control of Parliament.

In the current political drama, as some observers have noted, it is difficult to ignore the irony in the reversal of roles that Mahathir is facing in trying to unseat Najib. During the 22 years of his premiership, Mahathir had been outstandingly efficient in removing potential threats to his power. As a result, neither the Rulers, nor the courts, nor Parliament, nor his political and civil society opponents stood a chance of acting against his interests.

Today, Najib, as the beneficiary of this concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister, has demonstrated how thoroughly effective Mahathir had been in that mission by outlasting all efforts to force him out of office.

So now, Mahathir is left to demonstrate how the rules of the game could be rewritten from outside the pinnacle of power. For that, it takes at least a political instinct to recognise how to tip the power equation in one's favour, the charisma and gumption to lead a political organisation, the resources or linkages to forge a parliamentary majority and a sound understanding of voters' psychology.

Here, it is useful to distinguish between the popular conception of how a democracy ought to work in the people's best interests, and how the DNA of political actors drives them to support one leader or bloc over another, depending on the writing on the wall. Suffice it to say that the two are very different animals, despite some superficial similarities.

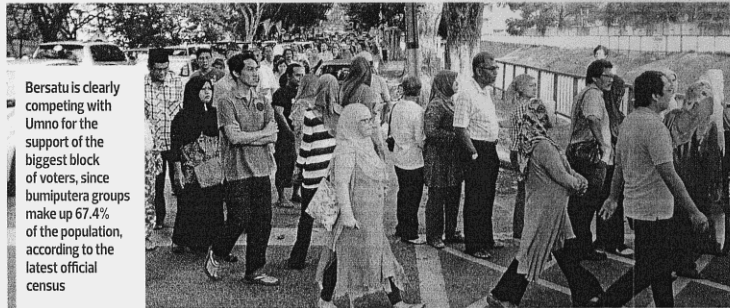
As for the new party, it is clearly competing with



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Umno for the support of the biggest block of voters, since bumiputera groups make up 67.4% of the population, according to the latest official census.

To the political pragmatist in Mahathir, it would be abundantly clear that the key to realising his goal of removing the current prime minister is to create an alternative platform for Umno leaders who sense that the time may be ripe for the dominant political brand to get a makeover.

At the ground level, Mahathir's team may be hoping that the new party will appeal to Umno-friendly voters who wish that things were different on their home turf, but who cannot bring themselves to vote for the current alternative coalition.

All other ideas, such as the importance of moving beyond the politics of race and religion, and the need to restore the checks and balances on the executive, are not going to be of much use to change the minds of that crucial group of voters who perceive that their welfare is inextricably tied to Umno and the BN bandwagon.

So, a key element of the strategy would be for Bersatu to fight Umno in Peninsular Malaysia, while forging links with the power brokers in Sabah and Sarawak, where non-Malay bumiputera groups hold sway. Hence, the "pribumi" in the party's name, that is current in Indonesia, is given an interesting new coinage.

For the strategy to work, it is essential that the new party sits down with Malay-based parties, including PAS and Amanah, to chalk out an electoral pact. Given the falling out among PAS leaders that led to Amanah's birth, it will be interesting to watch how this game plays out.

One potential casualty in this new political formula is Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the de facto leader of the Pakatan Harapan coalition, whose absence from the political stage due to his imprisonment leaves

him in the shadows at this crucial time.

Already, Mahathir's leadership in launching a Citizens' Declaration earlier this year calling for Najib to step down, which brought him to the same stage as his harshest critics, does not bode well for Anwar's cause.

But can a new political brand win voters' hearts and minds in time for the next general election, which must be called by 2018?

With all the advantages of incumbency at his disposal, Najib has many weapons in his arsenal to disarm his opponents, so Mahathir's party has formidable obstacles to overcome.

Already, an unprecedented number of prosecutions and lawsuits against opposition leaders and civil rights activists has set the tone of the current political climate. In addition, democrats have expressed their misgivings at the sweeping scope of the National Security Council Act, which provides for the suspension of civil rights in any area deemed to be under a security threat.

These developments aside, the Sarawak state election in May and the by-elections in Kuala Kangsar and Sungai Besar thereafter, in all of which the Barisan Nasional coalition trumped its opponents, provide the template for the next national polls.

As the winds of change begin to blow stronger, an early election may be Najib's best bet to snatch the offensive from his mentor-turned-nemesis. Incidentally, Mahathir came down with a chest infection on the day that the party's application to be registered was submitted by its president, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who was sacked as Najib's deputy in the government and Umno.

Things could get rather feverish for the body politic in a short time.

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