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The paradox that is Mahathir

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Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is the self-declared leader of Pakatan Harapan but can he find his way through the disarray, rivalry and distrust and whip the coalition into shape for the general election?

THE cat is finally out of the bag. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad intends to play the role of adviser in the government if Pakatan Harapan captures Putrajaya.

It was the first clear-cut indication that the former Premier not only wants to topple Barisan Nasional, he wants to have a say if Pakatan Harapan forms the next government.

It was quite a singular admission on his part. He told a political forum recently that he still had a lot of unfinished business. When he called it a day after 22 years in power, it was because he had been up there too long and not because he had accomplished all that he set out to do.

Then out came a rather titillating tidbit – he hoped that Pakatan will not reject his advice the way his successors Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak did.

That statement probably sent shivers zig-zagging down the spine of Pakatan leaders.

No one can dispute that Dr Mahathir has the most complete experience in the Opposition coalition.

But what will happen if the Pakatan leaders do not take his advice or ignore his ideas? Will he go after the Pakatan Prime Minister the way he is hounding and smearing Najib?

Will he push the sitting Prime Minister down like what he did to Pak Lah? And if he cannot make the Prime Minister go, will he try to bring down the entire government?

The answer is probably “yes” to all of the above. Dr Mahathir retired in 2003 but he is still unable to let go.

It has been more than a year since Dr Mahathir joined forces with the Opposition and what a fascinating year it has been.

He is arguably the greatest paradox in our political history and he has changed the dynamics of the Opposition coalition. He brought the wow-factor to Pakatan as well as a ton of baggage.

“For so many years, he was such a presence in our public life. He’s very aware of that, he understands what he has designed and that is what he is bringing to the opposition dynamic. I don’t think he’s a liability at all. As to whether he is an advantage, that is left to be seen,” said political commentator Eddin Khoo.

Khoo is insistent that Dr Mahathir has brought some semblance of leadership to an opposition that is in disarray.

However, it is no secret that the real opposition leader Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail does not trust Dr Mahathir nor has she forgiven him for what her family went through. But not many people realise that because she is a classy dame who does not openly show her disdain.

But the mask slipped briefly about a month ago when a reporter tackled her on the question of Dr Mahathir becoming the opposition leader as he could



No love lost: It is no secret that Dr Wan Azizah is unimpressed by Dr Mahathir’s behind-the-scenes attempt to push Muhyiddin forward as Pakatan’s Prime Minister candidate.



Kamarulzaman: Cronyism claims by founding member of Parti Pribumi.



Dr Redzuan: ‘When the tree falls, even the tortoise can walk over it’.



Muhyiddin: He wants to be the Prime Minister-in-waiting.



Khoo: Dr Mahathir is the self-declared leader of Pakatan.

“unite the Opposition”.

The normally reticent PKR president replied in a snappy tone: “You think so? But he came to see Anwar. I think if he is so good at uniting, he doesn’t need to come. It means that it’s not so easy. We are seen as fragmented and breaking up but give us some credit, we (have been) holding the fort for some time now.”

Dr Wan Azizah’s prickly response happened shortly after the second meeting between Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim during one of Anwar’s many court appearances.

What transpired at the meeting was a rather well-kept secret until recently.

A well-placed PKR source said Dr Mahathir had asked for the meeting. The elder man wanted Anwar’s agreement to name Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as Pakatan’s Prime Minister candidate.

That was about two months ago and the fact that Dr Mahathir has yet to declare Muhyiddin as the chosen one suggests that Anwar did not agree.

The source said Muhyiddin had also approached Anwar with the same request.

“He (Muhyiddin) is desperate to be the PM. He told Anwar he would hold the post for two years and then pass it on to Anwar,” said the source.

But Anwar is no fool and according to the source, Anwar told Muhyiddin: “Show me your

party’s strength first”.

Dr Wan Azizah has also not warmed up to Muhyiddin. It is known among PKR circles that Anwar had asked his wife to approach Muhyiddin shortly after he was sacked from the Cabinet but he refused to see her.

The way the tables have turned is both pitiful and comical at the same time. Who would have imagined that the day would come when Dr Mahathir has to *kow tow* to Anwar?

For that matter, who would have thought that Lim Kit Siang would one day become an ardent defender of Dr Mahathir? Or that Dr Mahathir would attend the DAP national congress and praise the party?

But yes, miracles do happen in politics.

Anwar is stuck in prison but he has read the ground well. Agreeing to Muhyiddin as the Prime Minister candidate would not go down well with the component parties.

Moreover, Parti Pribumi has only one MP and two assemblymen to its name. Allowing the weakest party to grab the highest post would mean breaking the rules of the game.

But the Parti Pribumi leaders are growing anxious. Their membership drive has reached a plateau and they have not been able to attract more people or big names from Umno.

They need to lay claim to the Prime Minister post in order to

make new ground and to negotiate for seats in the general election. They need Muhyiddin to go around the country as the Prime Minister-in-waiting.

To make matters worse, members are leaving the party barely three months after its formation.

One of its founding members Kamarulzaman Habibur Rahman announced on Wednesday that he and several hundred others have quit, citing a string of grievances ranging from cronyism to the claim that Parti Pribumi leaders are prepared to destroy the nation’s economy for the Prime Minister post.

The Pakatan side has claimed that Kamarulzaman has been bought over and that his leaving has no impact.

The Umno side says this is what happens when people go off to form a new party out of revenge and frustration.

Kamarulzaman was bombarded with nasty SMS texts from his Umno friends when he quit Umno last year. On Wednesday, he changed his phone number because he knew the nasty messages would now be coming from the Parti Pribumi side.

The silence on the part of top Parti Pribumi leaders is telling. Kamarulzaman is in no man’s land, nobody really wants to have much to do with him but he can do damage to Parti Pribumi.

According to polls expert Datuk Dr Prof Redzuan Othman, Dr

Mahathir’s approval rating was more than 20% when he first joined the Opposition. But it is now down to around 15%.

“Anwar can see that they need him more than he needs them. There is a Malay saying that when the tree falls, even the tortoise can walk over it. The excitement over Mahathir has died. I think people can see that a lot of problems we are stuck with is because of him,” said Dr Redzuan.

Political fatigue has also deepened. Even all the noise about the general election being around the corner has failed to stir curiosity. There was little excitement about Parti Pribumi being formally inducted into Pakatan.

Among the ordinary folk, stories of accidents, murder, robberies and suicides are greater talking points than politics. The sensational North Korean murder trumped every single political event for weeks.

All said and done, Dr Mahathir has fitted in perfectly with what Pakatan needs – a big-name Malay leader whom they can use to whack Umno or, as they would say in DAP, “Malay screw Malay”.

But his views are not always accepted by Pakatan. For instance, his opposition to the idea of local government election upset Pakatan leaders. Local government election has been part of the Pakatan manifesto since 2008 and they immediately rebutted him.

They also downplayed his claim that he and Dr Wan Azizah have been made joint advisers of Pakatan.

His proposal to register the coalition and contest the general election under a common symbol will probably die stillborn because there is no way DAP will give up its rocket symbol.

Muhyiddin’s suggestion that Pakatan be renamed Barisan Rakyat also received the silent treatment.

Parti Pribumi leaders are still finding their way through Pakatan politics. The newest and smallest partner thinks it knows best how to win the general election.

Unfortunately, the senior partners think that Parti Pribumi should know its place and not talk as though it knows everything.

“They know they need a strong leader but cannot decide on who will be the leader. Even Dr Mahathir, he is the self-proclaimed leader,” said Khoo.

Pakatan, said Khoo, has many clever and capable personalities but they cannot seem to get along with each other.

“Being unable to agree on a credible PM candidate is a problem because people are looking for strong leadership, it is the trend everywhere in the world. For as long as you cannot project your aspirations through one person, then it’s going to be all over the place – no direction, no action or focus,” said Khoo.

But it is still not too late to get their act together.