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Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia chairman Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Kuala Lumpur High Court yesterday. PIC BY AIZUDDIN SAAD

JOINT LEADERSHIP PROPOSAL

Dr M meets Anwar in closed-door meeting

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KUALA LUMPUR: Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday met former arch-nemesis Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to propose the possibility of jointly leading the opposition in the next general election, amid accusations lobbed at the former prime minister over a series of about-turns.

A source said the closed-door meeting took place at the Kuala Lumpur Court Complex in Jalan Dutta yesterday, where the RM100-million defamation trial involving Anwar and Youth and Sports Minister Khairy Jamaluddin was ongoing.

The source revealed that a discussion between Dr Mahathir and Anwar was held in the witness room for about 40 minutes after the proceeding was adjourned at noon.

"Dr Mahathir arrived in the morning and sat in the public gallery before Anwar. During the discussion, Dr Mahathir proposed for both of them to jointly spearhead the opposition's charge in the 14th General Election.

"Anwar did not immediately agree, but the discussion took a serious turn."

The source said Dr Mahathir and Anwar were exploring possibilities on the make-up of the coalition should the proposal be agreed upon.

"They are looking into all scenarios, including the possible involvement of Pas. As of now, the proposal centres on the current opposition pact," the source said.

Dr Mahathir had visited Anwar at the same court complex in September last year, when the latter was pushing for the suspension of the National Security Council Act. Anwar is being held at the Sungai Buloh Prison after he was found guilty of sodomising a former aide.

In 1998, Dr Mahathir sacked Anwar from his deputy prime minister's post following accusations of homosexuality and corruption. The two later became bitter enemies for al-

most two decades.

In December, Pakatan Harapan and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), of which Dr Mahathir is chairman, signed an agreement to form an electoral pact for the next election.

PPBM, however, met a stumbling block in efforts to acquire electoral seats, after PKR and DAP appeared reluctant to hand over some of theirs.

A meeting held between PPBM and Pas over seat allocations earlier this month also reached a stalemate, when Pas appeared non-committal on the fledgling party's requests.

Meanwhile, political analysts believed Dr Mahathir's proposal came on the heels of PPBM's unsuccessful talks to secure the seats it needed to contest in GE14.

Universiti Sains Malaysia Professor Dr Sivamurugan Pandian said it was likely that Dr Mahathir thought Anwar could assist in strengthening PPBM's chances of competing in the election.

"This is to increase PPBM's chances of getting seats and Dr Mahathir believes Anwar can help him to do so. Dr Mahathir will want to avoid three-cornered contests as that will be in Barisan Nasional's favour."

Sivamurugan also expressed surprise that Dr Mahathir would come up with the proposal as tradition dictated that only the leader of the campaign would be appointed as the prime minister-designate.

"That is usually the case. But I do not think they have ironed out the issue or whether it has been discussed. They will also need to come up with a shadow cabinet to substantiate their campaign to the voters."

Universiti Utara Malaysia political scientist Associate Professor Muhammad Fuad Othman said Dr Mahathir was counting on Anwar to exert a certain degree of influence