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Drama behind the Pakatan Harapan curtains

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THE reaction out there is still mixed a day after the Pakatan Harapan leadership structure was formalised. Some are elated because it is a major breakthrough in Pakatan's quest to face off against Barisan Nasional in the general election.

"They passed a big hurdle. It also means one less attacking point against them, although how effective they will be remains to be seen," said political commentator Khaw Veon Szu.

Others are uninspired, while the bulk of those who follow politics are still unsure what to make of it. The potpourri of mixed feelings is largely centred around one factor or rather one man – Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad – who is the chairman of the coalition.

He occupies the top tier of the coalition alongside PKR de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and president Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. Questions have been raised as to who will be calling the shots among the three top guns.

Those familiar with Dr Mahathir think it is a silly question – of course, the former premier will be calling the shots. On the other hand, those familiar with PKR politics know that

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Dr Wan Azizah will want to refer certain decisions to her imprisoned husband, who still has the "veto vote".

What began as a historic handshake has turned into a partnership between the former nemeses. The impossible has become possible, even though many people still have trouble believing that Dr Mahathir is the answer to the country's problems.

With the leadership line-up settled, the coalition can now move on to drawing up its common framework and begin discussions over seats to contest.

But according to a highly-placed source in Pakatan, Dr Mahathir's position as chairman was not a done deal until the final few days. At one stage, Dr Mahathir even confided to some that he would pull Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia out of the coalition if the other leaders could

not agree on his chairman post.

From the very start, the Anwar family and some PKR figures around the family were not comfortable with making Dr Mahathir the chairman of Pakatan.

The group had trust issues with Dr Mahathir and it had drawn up a document to make Anwar the eighth prime minister and to secure his release and pardon.

The document which went by the title "Proclamation Harapan", carried only three points – the first was to ensure that Anwar would be released from prison, the second was to secure a royal pardon for his sodomy conviction and the third was that the coalition would commit to supporting him as the eighth prime minister of Malaysia.

Proclamation Harapan was supposed to be the centrepiece of the announcement of the Pakatan leadership line-up.

According to the source, that was what the London meeting between Anwar's daughter Nurul Izzah and Dr Mahathir was about.

Nurul Izzah had been sent as an emissary to get Dr Mahathir to sign the document, upon which the family would give their full support for him to be Pakatan chairman. The

elder man was reportedly shocked, not only by the request but also by the nature of the document.

Anwar's signature was already on the document which was meant to be signed by a total of six leaders, including Dr Mahathir, Dr Wan Azizah, Lim Kit Siang, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Mohamad Sabu.

It was quite clear that those around Anwar are still distrustful of Dr Mahathir and they are not convinced he would back their man for the top post.

Dr Mahathir balked at the request because, as some pointed out, he had already conceded so much to Anwar. He went to court twice to meet Anwar, he expressed his commitment to the coalition and gave an interview to *The Guardian* to say he supported Anwar for the prime minister's job.

Moreover, the family's push to put Proclamation Harapan on the table was akin to putting the cart before the horse and he refused to sign it. Two other PKR leaders tried to persuade Dr Mahathir to sign the document after he returned from London on July 8, but they were also unsuccessful.

All this went on without the

knowledge of the other PKR leaders and the political bureau only learnt about the document when they met on Tuesday evening.

Some of them were quite upset at not being kept in the loop and deputy president Datuk Seri Azmin Ali reportedly told his president that as much as the party loves Anwar and wants him to be freed, the coalition's policies and reform agenda should take centrestage over the document.

The document remains unsigned by the other leaders and Dr Mahathir explained to the Pakatan leaders on Thursday night why a document spelling out what the coalition intends to bring to the people must take priority, assuring everyone that Anwar's release is implicit to Pakatan's aims.

The drama over the stillborn document suggests that the former nemeses are still struggling to trust each other.

The Anwar family – or Istana Segambut as they are known – is learning that you do not play the fool with the man who survived 22 years at the top.

But Dr Mahathir is not going to have it easy either because the man he once put in jail is still pressing the buttons from behind bars.