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Ripples over Pakatan's 'top dog'

The appointment of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as chairman of Pakatan Harapan is the mother of all U-turns but opposition leaders are looking to him to deliver the Malay heartland seats.

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IT was only Day Four on his job as chairman of Pakatan Harapan but the signs are that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has overshadowed his counterparts in the coalition's leadership triangle.

He has taken to his role of "top dog" - his own words - like a fish to water.

He called his first press conference as chairman on Tuesday, looking rather Prime Ministerial in a dark Nehru jacket and he described himself as the "unofficial equivalent" to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

His chairmanship of Pakatan seems to have given him a boost of energy and he took questions from the media with that typical blend of irony, wit and cynicism. It was hard to believe that he has just celebrated his 92nd birthday.

The former Premier is no stranger to the limelight but there was something a little different about him that day, a certain *bon vivant* that suggested this is where he wants to be - at the top and calling the shots.

The last one week has been an amazing moment in Malaysia's politics - the man who ruled the country for 22 years is now heading the opposition coalition.

He is so single-minded about overthrowing the Barisan Nasional government that he has been bending over backwards for the Anwar family.

He turned up at Nurul Izzah Hari Raya open house in Lembah Pantai, a sign that he sees Anwar's eldest daughter as a conduit to winning over the family.

"It was a big political gesture for him to be there. It was an Izzah crowd but after he arrived, it became a Mahathir crowd," said Unisel vice-chancellor Datuk Prof Redzuan Othman.

It is still a marriage of convenience at this point.

Many of the Pakatan leaders do not really trust him. But they can also see that he has brought leadership to the coalition in a way that Pakatan president Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail could not.

"If *KU (ketua umum)* or Anwar can put aside his grievances, who are we to question? I am trying to be realistic about the situation. My circle of friends are actually quite relieved because there is now a definite chain of command," said Kelana Jaya PKR division secretary Najwan Halimi.

It is an exciting time for Pakatan with Dr Mahathir at the top, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as the de facto leader and Dr Wan Azizah as president.

The next general election will be about the Malay votes and they now have a big Malay name to bring the Pakatan brand to the Malay heartland, especially the Felda schemes which hold a total of 60 parliamentary seats.

The Umno side is not panicking as some Pakatan leaders have claimed, but they are not taking the new development lightly. Like



Triangular leadership: Dr Mahathir shares the top tier in Pakatan with Anwar and Dr Wan Azizah but he has declared himself the 'top dog'.



Amir: "Are Malaysians ready for another round of Mahathir?"



Najwan: He is trying to be realistic about the political situation



Saari: Struggling to contain the fallout in Otai Reformis group

everyone else, they are watching very closely.

Dr Mahathir is a lethal enemy because he knows the strengths and weaknesses of Umno.

Whether Pakatan under Dr Mahathir can shake up the Malay heartland should become clearer in the coming months.

The opposition coalition has shown that survival in politics is not only about moving forward, it is also about the ability to put the past behind them and, in the case of Dr Mahathir, to side-step the awkward bits and pieces.

Take, for example, his explanation of his newfound ties with Anwar: "Anwar was against me but I accepted him into Umno, we were together many years. Then certain things happened, we had to separate. Now certain other things happen, we have to come together again."

It was quite incredulous the way he conveniently summed up Anwar's sacking, the sodomy trial and years of condemnation as "certain things happened".

Politics, as Dr Mahathir admitted, is full of surprises. It is also full of contradictions.

Just a few years ago, Lim Kit Siang had derided Najib's Premiership as a new era of

Mahathirism and during the 2013 general election, Lim's wish was for Dr Mahathir to live to 100 so that he would see the fall of Mahathirism.

All that is history because the DAP leader is now a big advocate and defender of Dr Mahathir.

DAP is still trying to explain why the party which has the most seats - 38 in Parliament and 95 in the state assemblies - is not at the "penthouse level" with Dr Mahathir, Anwar and Dr Wan Azizah.

The obvious answer is that Pakatan does not want to frighten off the Malay votes. It is trying to tell the Malays that DAP does not dominate the coalition.

However, it is a letdown for the Chinese who used to mock MCA and Gerakan for playing second fiddle to Umno. The Chinese thought DAP would be different and that it would propel them to be on par with the Malay leaders but the party is still one floor below the Pakatan penthouse.

The thirst for power means that a lot of compromise and U-turns have to be made by all the parties involved. The sad thing is that they have lost the moral high ground amid all these twists and turns.

It is no small irony that the opposition's agenda is now being

led by Dr Mahathir. Until today, DAP and PKR are still explaining to their party members why they have to work with their former enemy.

But, said a DAP politician from Penang, Dr Mahathir is the most suitable person to fill the vacuum left by Anwar.

"He is the disrupter and terminator, no one else can do it better than him," said the politician.

Apart from Dr Wan Azizah, the coalition's presidential council comprises six ex-Umno leaders, three DAP leaders and two ex-PAS leaders.

Pakatan used to blame Umno for everything wrong with the country but it is now relying on former Umno leaders to win the general election. It means the opposition battle cry of ABU or "Anything But Umno" will have to be abandoned.

On the PKR side, the Otai Reformis (reformasi veterans) group of Anwar supporters are also divided over Anwar's decision to work with the "Mahafiraun" or Pharoah, their term for Dr Mahathir.

Hulu Kelang assemblyman Saari Sungib, who heads the group, is expecting a fiery session when the group convenes for an emergency meeting this Sunday.

Teras president Azmi Hamid, who is an old friend of Anwar, admitted that he is less than convinced that this coalition of old enemies and new friends can form or run a government.

"Spell out your vision about things you are going to do to convince the people that you are a better alternative," said Azmi.

Anwar is Pakatan's eighth Prime Minister candidate and the understanding is that the Prime Minister will come from the party that wins the most seats. What if DAP, which is currently the most successful in the stable, ends up with the most seats?

Political commentator Khaw Veon Szu said the coalition needs to name their seventh PM in order to fire up the voters.

If he is someone that voters can accept, it could be the gamechanger. But if he is not, it could be game-over.

"The question that needs to be asked is whether Malaysians are ready for another round of Mahathir? Where is our Macron or Trudeau?" said KRA strategy director Amir Faeed Rahim, referring to French president Emmanuel Macron and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau who represented a generational change of leadership.

Dr Mahathir's leadership of Pakatan may come at the expense of Chinese support. The Chinese dislike for and resentment against Umno began during the Mahathir years.

"He brings out a wide spectrum of emotions among many Chinese who blame him for the state of affairs in the country. The Chinese professional class blames Mahathir for almost everything. That kind of mindset is hard to change overnight.

"It doesn't mean that the Chinese will turn to BN but with him there, Pakatan cannot carry as much Chinese support as in 2013, I am sure of that," said Khaw.

Nevertheless, many Chinese still go gaga at the sight of Dr Mahathir rubbing shoulders with DAP's Lim - two aged tigers at the sunset of their lives still stalking the political landscape. They whip out their handphones to record the moment that they never dreamt would happen.

Parti Pribumi held its Penang Hari Raya open house at the Lee Kongsi along Burma Road. It drew a festive crowd but at the VIP table, the body language between the DAP and Parti Pribumi leaders was still quite awkward.

Just imagine this - what kind of social conversation can you really have with someone whom you have blasted for decades but whom you now have to work with? It was a table of strange bedfellows still getting used to each other.

Besides, it had been a long day for Dr Mahathir. He had come from another event in Kulim and he looked tired and sounded a bit short of breath.

But the sparkling wit came on the moment he stepped on stage. He knew that people out there viewed him and his new friends as strange bedfellows and he could sense the question in their minds and that was: Will this coalition go the same way as Pakatan Rakyat?

As such, he indulged in some friendly banter: "Kit Siang is not my friend, he is my enemy but the two enemies have to become friends to save the country."

Pakatan's challenge is not only having to face off Barisan Nasional, it also has to convince voters out there that their marriage is for real because Malaysian politics has seen too many strange bedfellows come and go.