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Undercurrents over PM post

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Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim showed magnanimity in declaring that he is no longer the opposition coalition's prime minister candidate but was he also telling Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to follow suit?

DATUK Seri Anwar Ibrahim's decision to withdraw as the prime minister candidate in Pakatan Harapan is still rippling through the coalition.

It caught Pakatan leaders by surprise. They had become so used to mouthing his name as their prime minister candidate that they did not know what to make of it.

Some of them even thought it was fake news but it was all too true.

"It was shocking news for me because it has always been our stand to have him as the PM," said Shamsul Iskandar who is PKR vice-president and Bukit Katil MP.

Anwar said he wants to see an end to the politicking and for Pakatan to focus on the general election which is fine and good.

"Anwar always talks about having trust in the wisdom of the people. He is concerned that our reform agenda has been pushed to the side by the politicking over the PM post," said lawyer and former Balik Pulau MP Yusmadi Yusoff.

It seemed like a unanimous resolution to the prime-minister-in-waiting saga. But as the complete meaning of Anwar's decision began to sink in, it was clear that the PKR leader was also trying to send a message to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

As some pointed out, the clue was in the opening words of his statement: "I am choosing not to offer myself as the candidate for prime minister."

Dr Mahathir has twice offered himself as Pakatan's prime minister candidate in the last one month.

Some thought he was joking when he said that he may be "forced to consider" taking up the top job if there is a proposal from his "friends" in Pakatan. He is, after all, 92 years old and for him to return to the top job would make Malaysia the laughing stock of the world.

Anwar, shrewd as always, knew that Dr Mahathir was not joking.

Malaysia's most special prisoner somehow managed to release a statement to remind everyone that Pakatan, and not Dr Mahathir, would decide on the prime minister candidate.

"People don't volunteer to be prime minister, there has to be a consensus," he said in his statement.

Undeterred, the elder man repeated his intention, telling the Tokyo-based *Nikkei Asian Review* that he may become prime minister for a short while if the opposition won the next general election. But Dr Mahathir did say that this would only take place with the agreement of everybody.

A week after that, Anwar declared he was withdrawing himself from the prime minister post.

Some have interpreted it as Anwar trying to checkmate Dr Mahathir. Others claimed that Anwar was leaving it to Pakatan to decide on the prime minister candidate.

"These are two forceful personalities who have yet to play out their bitter experiences. They have this dynamic going on, lots of push and pull and they know each other so well. It is also a nudge at Mahathir, that old generals cannot return to lead.

"But reality is setting in for Anwar and by removing himself, an obstacle has been cleared. The question is who will fill the vacuum and does Pakatan have enough time to propel a new candidate?" said political commentator Eddin Khoo.

There have apparently been numerous approaches to bring Anwar around to the idea that having him as the prime minister candidate is not selling especially among the urban voters. The process from prisoner to prime minister is too complicated and voters are not stupid.



Old feelings die hard: They have reconciled but Anwar is not comfortable about Dr Mahathir positioning himself as Pakatan's prime minister candidate.



Yusmadi: He is concerned that PKR's reform agenda is being hijacked.



Khoo: Does Pakatan have enough time to propel a new PM candidate?



Dr Afif: Openly said that Dr Mahathir should consider not contesting in the next polls.

Amanah president Mohamad Sabu and vice-president Datuk Husam Musa had apparently told him that the party would not be supporting him for the post.

An old ABIM friend also had a discussion with him when he was brought to court recently.

Meanwhile, the pragmatic segment in Pakatan want to name Dr Mahathir for the post because they believe it will help swing the Malay vote.

Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail does not appear to be among them.

"The trouble is this - the person has been the enemy of 'reformasi' and suddenly you want to make him the leader of the reform movement. It's hard to accept," said Yusmadi who is also the political secretary to the Opposition Leader.

The PKR president had been lukewarm about elevating Dr Mahathir in the Pakatan power structure. She told a press conference on Thursday that there was no need for Pakatan to come up with a prime minister name for now and it was better to wait until they win the general election.

Actually, Dr Wan Azizah had convened the press conference to call for a Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) on the latest DOJ or United States Department of Justice investigation into 1MDB. But reporters were more interested in asking about how the RCI formed to investigate the forex scandal dur-

ing Dr Mahathir's premiership would affect his bid for a second shot at the job.

Dr Mahathir, said Khoo, has been both a boon and a bane to Pakatan. He is the X-factor that is stirring the Malay ground especially in Kedah where Parti Pribumi *ceramah* have drawn crowds.

But he has also become a problematic figure for the Pakatan leaders. They want to use him to take away votes from Umno but they do not want him as their prime minister.

"I am not open to the idea of Mahathir as the PM. It's like telling the world we do not have new talent. The door should be open to fresh air," said Shamsul.

The discord over the prime minister issue is affecting the image of Pakatan. Moreover, it is taking place amid predictions from analysts and one research think-tank after another pointing to Barisan Nasional winning the general election.

The resistance against Dr Mahathir is most evident in PKR, the party that was born out of his action against Anwar.

Deputy AMK chief Dr Afif Bahardin has openly said that Dr Mahathir should consider not contesting the next general election. Dr Afif, who is a state exco member in Penang, said it is better for the "next generation" to take over Putrajaya.

Pakatan cannot afford to go into the general election without a prime minister candidate because even the PAS-led Gagasan

Sejaterah has Datuk Seri Hadi Awang as their main man.

"The PM candidate must be able to appeal to voters, to sell Pakatan to the voters, a figure for voters to rally behind," said Dr Afif.

Or as one DAP politician put it: "You say remove Najib, but who next?"

They have also been unable to formally agree on the new Pakatan structure which reportedly features Anwar as adviser, Dr Mahathir as chairman and Dr Wan Azizah as president.

There are four deputy presidents comprising Datuk Seri Azmin Ali, Lim Guan Eng, Mat Sabu and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. Azmin is the only non-party president at that level but he is well-positioned as the sort of "next generation" leader that Dr Afif referred to.

The prime minister debacle has hindered Pakatan from moving forward.

The leaders, said the above DAP politician, are keen to register the coalition after which they can proceed to deal with the all-important matter of seat allocation. The party contesting the highest number of seats can then lay claim to the posts of prime minister and deputy prime minister.

DAP's Lim Kit Siang had declared a one-month moratorium on the debate over the prime minister post to cool down the issue.

One person who seems to be observing the moratorium is Dr Mahathir. Many in Pakatan still regard him as some sort of white knight trotting in to help Pakatan conquer the Malay ground and make life difficult for Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

Unfortunately, he is also a point of conflict, his past keeps revisiting him and the situation in Pakatan seems messier than before he came into the picture.

Dr Mahathir recently tweeted a picture of himself with Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir stirring a giant cauldron of breaking fast porridge with the comment: "Memang depa kata saya 'pengacau', a tongue-in-cheek reference to talk that he is someone who likes to stir up things.

Behind that trademark charismatic smile is a man who does not have very much time left.

He has been around long enough to know that politics is sometimes like cooking porridge. Timing is important and unless the Pakatan leaders reach a consensus soon, the porridge may turn into rice.