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No consensus on PM candidate

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Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has brought his star power to Pakatan Harapan but the coalition is not interested in having the 92-year-old leader as their candidate for Prime Minister.

FOR a while, it seemed like Datuk Zaid Ibrahim had been reined in by DAP. He had stopped commenting on issues and his blog, which is a classic reflection of his man-of-letters reputation had become rather tame of late.

But this is one wild horse that cannot be domesticated and earlier this week, Zaid was back to his regular self.

During a dinner that was widely seen as a launch of his bid to become the next MP for Gelang Patah, he boldly proposed Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as the Prime Ministerial (PM) candidate for Pakatan Harapan.

That is a pretty bizarre idea but, nevertheless, the audience at the DAP event held in a Chinese restaurant near Skudai broke into applause.

Dr Mahathir and several top DAP leaders were also there and it was unclear whether Zaid had run it by his party bosses before making the announcement.

It is also a good thing that nothing in politics surprises Malaysian voters anymore because the dinner event signified the U-turn that Pakatan has become known for.

During the Hulu Selangor by-election in 2010, Dr Mahathir had campaigned against Zaid who was then with PKR but Zaid is now championing him for the coveted job.

In the 2013 election campaign, Dr Mahathir had asked voters to bury DAP leader Lim Kit Siang in Gelang Patah. But the pair are now holding hands to bury Barisan Nasional in the general election.

Dr Mahathir also won loud applause when he declared that DAP is not an anti-Malay party. That was another U-turn because he had painted DAP as a Chinese chauvinist party throughout his years in Umno. That evening also marked the end of any pretences that Lim may still defend Gelang Patah in the general election.

So much has changed in Malaysian politics, yet so little has changed in the way our politicians play politics.

Zaid has since elaborated on his Mahathir-for-PM idea in his blog, describing the former premier as the *suntikan baru* or new impetus for Pakatan Harapan and also a serious PM candidate.

He said there was only a small chance for Pakatan to win the election and that he regarded Dr Mahathir as the one factor that could make it happen. He urged Pakatan leaders to swallow their pride and persuade the elder man to agree to be the PM of the new government.

He was also aware that his Pakatan partners would not like it and he told his would-be critics, "If you don't like it, you can lump it".

The last time he pushed the parameters was shortly after he joined DAP when he declared Dr Mahathir as the de facto opposition leader, prompting an immediate telling-off from the DAP leadership.



Old is not always gold: Dr Mahathir, Anwar and Muhyiddin are possible Prime Ministerial candidates in Pakatan Harapan and they have one awkward commonality – all are products of Umno, the party Pakatan leaders love to hate.



Azmin: Those who see him as PM material are gathering strength.

Zaid: Ruffled feathers in naming Dr Mahathir for top job.

Dr Wan Azizah: To occupy hot seat till her husband can take over.

This time around, there has been a chilly silence from the DAP leaders and which can only suggest two things – they are not into Dr Mahathir as the PM and they are upset with Zaid for stirring an issue they would prefer not to deal with for now.

DAP is a very hierarchical party and impulsive announcements on key issues are frowned upon, what more, coming from a new recruit.

But the question among a number of DAP leaders was whether there is a grand strategy behind the whole thing.

"What is his beef? What are the plausible motives? Is that all he can bring to the table to convince voters?" said one DAP politician.

They are wondering whether there is a hidden hand somewhere. Unlike Zaid who wants to put Dr Mahathir on a pedestal, the mainstay of Pakatan just want to use Dr Mahathir to split the Umno vote, to harass Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and to whack Umno.

They think Dr Mahathir's best years are behind him, he has too much baggage to be their PM candidate.

Moreover, it is an open secret that Dr Mahathir is *persona non grata* with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. The former premier has a problematic history with the Kelantan royalty. His name was

struck off the guest list when the King was sworn in and he was not even on the guest list at the royal installation last month.

"There are more relevant issues to tackle first, like which party will contest in which seats, our common framework and manifesto and even our common logo," said the above DAP politician.

The same politician said some DAP leaders also have doubts about Parti Pribumi's commitment to the Opposition coalition and whether it will go back to Umno.

Well-placed PKR sources said Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had recently expressed the same concern. One of the reasons why Anwar did not agree to naming Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as the PM candidate was because he was unsure if Muhyiddin would go back to Umno after winning.

PKR deputy president Datuk Seri Azmin Ali, the man who brought Dr Mahathir into the Opposition, played it coy. He said Pakatan already had a PM candidate and the question of Dr Mahathir filling the post had never been discussed.

Actually, Pakatan's official candidate has long been Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail although the faction in PKR who see Azmin as PM material are gathering force.

The PKR president has been

projected as the interim PM until Anwar is available to step in. The storyline is that upon winning, Pakatan will petition the King to pardon Anwar who will then contest a by-election and go on to become PM.

It is one of those magic bullet theories which as one PKR insider put it: "With the right statistics, you can make an elephant stand on a blade of grass".

But it has not stopped the veteran Otai Reformasi group who comprise die-hard supporters of Anwar from trying.

Two days after Zaid's venture to name Dr Mahathir as the PM candidate, the Otai Reformasi members gathered outside the National Palace to hand over a petition to free Anwar.

It was their way of saying that Anwar remains their choice for Prime Minister, a repudiation of Zaid's proposal and a rejection of Dr Mahathir. This is the same group that had spurned and jeered at Dr Mahathir when he attempted to win them over at a political gathering two months ago.

"Our fear is another round of Mahathir, 22 years is more than enough. Our aim is to tell people that there is a leader up there and it is not Mahathir," said an Otai Reformasi member from Terengganu.

How important is it to have a Prime Minister candidate? It is not absolutely necessary but it would be like a calling card to show you have someone with the credibility and know-how to run the country.

Every political coalition needs a unifying figure. Anwar was that figure in 2013, he was a sort of *primus inter pares*, a first among equals in the Opposition coalition.

The Barisan side has an established convention where the president of the party with the most seats gets the job. Pakatan has yet to develop such a consensus on the top post.

At the same time, many in Pakatan are unable to accept that the party which has only one MP is laying claim to the premiership. They prefer to settle for Dr Wan Azizah while peddling the storyline that Anwar will be freed, pardoned and installed as PM.

Dr Wan Azizah has shown strength and dignity throughout her husband's trials and tribulation but she is not of PM material.

Malaysia, said a political consultant, has a RM1.3 trillion economy that is the fourth biggest in Asean.

"It is not a question of gender, it's a big job where you need to be ready from day one," said the consultant.

It is only natural that Parti Pribumi regards itself as the party with the PM candidate – their chairman was the country's longest serving PM, their president was the Deputy PM and their deputy president was a Menteri Besar.

But PKR also has a former Deputy PM as well as a sitting Menteri Besar, namely Azmin, who has an approval rating of over 60% in Selangor.

"Being Menteri Besar of Selangor is like being the Governor of California. In fact, it is even more complex because you have to deal with issues of race, religion, big business and the palace. Anyone who can survive all that has the potential to be PM," said the above political consultant.

The fact that Pakatan seems unable to accept Azmin as a PM candidate speaks of the cracks between the two parties with the numbers to call the shots.

DAP has issues with Azmin. A lot of it has to do with his hard-nosed approach in the negotiation for seats in the last two general elections. The fissures deepened after the divisive Kajang Move and the Sarawak election where DAP and PKR contested against each other.

It is widely known that DAP's Selangor chief Tony Pua and Azmin do not get along.

When DAP proposed lawyer Dr Aziz Bari as a councillor in the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council, Azmin used his Menteri Besar clout to block the appointment. The talk was that the Selangor palace had issues with Dr Aziz who criticised the palace resistance to having Dr Wan Azizah as the Menteri Besar.

But it is more likely that Azmin smelt a rat somewhere. Azmin suspected the councillor post was a stepping stone, that DAP was grooming Dr Aziz as their Menteri Besar candidate and his killer instinct took over.

Moreover, Azmin is said to work well with Datuk Teng Chang Khim, a senior state exco member from DAP who is known to be in a different camp from Pua.

Pakatan leaders are annoyed at Zaid for reviving the PM issue which they have likened to trying to reboil a hard-boiled egg. They want to leave the matter on the back-burner and to cross the bridge when they come to it.