

Dr Mahathir or Anwar?

The more the question is 'Dr Mahathir or Anwar?', the more the answer is 'neither'. Can we go from 'or' to 'and'? *The Star - 21/6/2020 pg. 21*



At loggerheads: The choice doesn't have to be between Dr Mahathir (left) and Anwar, why can't it be both in a consensus-building form of democracy rather than the usual zero-sum game? — Filepics/The Star

everything, then the selection of a candidate for Prime Minister is the only question that truly matters.

Pakatan also has an institution called the Presidential Council, consisting of senior leaders from each party. Once again, however, given the way power is structured, the real influence this Presidential Council has on government policy can be said to be effectively zero.

The Prime Minister is empowered by law to govern the country exactly how he or she sees fit, and the only real leverage the Presidential Council and the MPs they represent have (if indeed they can actually control those MPs) is to threaten the Prime Minister with a vote of no confidence.

So once again, it is an all or nothing scenario.

At every step of the way, the crucial question is "X or Y", with no meaningful avenue, structure, or platform for "X and Y".

And in this either/or situation, it is quite understandable that no one

would be willing to budge. In a zero-sum game, there is simply too much to lose by budging. It's a rational fear that having your opponent rise to power will mean the end of you. The stalemate thus continues, unless a way is found to make the game not zero-sum.

I will comment on the question of Dr Mahathir or Anwar specifically only briefly. Suffice it to say that I don't expect Dr Mahathir to budge; but if I were Anwar, I would not budge either.

If Dr Mahathir had ever in his life been honestly willing to pass power to Anwar, he would have done so multiple times over. It is fast becoming foolish to believe otherwise.

In Anwar's position, considering very carefully everything that has happened in the last two years especially — I think I'd rather take my long term chances alone on the open sea. Principles before expediency.

I can appreciate the urgency with

which some feel we need a change of government. But if I have learned anything since 2018, it is that pseudo cosmetic changes are an incremental improvement — but not an improvement that will last or go the distance we need.

As my past columns show, I am no fan at all of the political party as we know it. I find it structurally outdated and built in such a way as to be hopelessly unreflective of the rakyat's aspirations.

However, if we assume for now that we cannot change that in the short term, I think the next best solution is to formalise an institution like the Presidential Council into a proper decision-making body.

As it stands, there is no group of individuals who together decide the nation's policy — only the Prime Minister alone.

Some would say the Cabinet serves this function, but the entire Cabinet serves at the pleasure of the Prime Minister and can be dismissed at his whim or fancy. This means that the Prime Minister is completely within his power to ignore 100% of the advice of his Cabinet. The only thing the Cabinet can do in protest is to either resign or, again, threaten a vote of no confidence.

My colleagues and I have been working on the concept of decentralisation. The idea is that the less power is concentrated, and the more individuals and stakeholders there are involved in making decisions, the better it is for the country.

Not everyone will agree. Some feel that the solution is more authoritarianism and benevolent dictators. A fair enough view, but I think history shows that while this may be good in the short term, it never ends well.

Imagine if the powers of the Prime Minister were dispersed to a body like the Presidential Council. In this scenario, government policy is ultimately decided collectively by leaders and representatives of all political parties within a coalition.

Simply put, in this scenario, we have moved beyond the exhausting and painfully passe question of "Dr Mahathir or Anwar" to a scenario of "Dr Mahathir and Anwar ... and Lim Guan Eng, Mohammad Sabu, Shafie Apdal, and whoever else".

You may say that this suggestion is hopelessly impractical, and will paralyse government with indecision.

I say: *Belum cuba, belum tahu* (if we haven't tried, we don't know).

This council can formally consider, discuss, and deliberate on every major policy question there is, including the appointments of ministers and other leaders.

If such a coalition council cannot agree on the big questions facing the nation, then it is no use pretending it is a real coalition at all. Sooner or later, it would meet the fate of so many coalitions we have seen these past years, and throw us again and again into the perilous waters of political instability.

As we face a time of great redefinition as a nation, we need to ask ourselves: are coalition politics in Malaysia all about gravy trains and a trickle-down pyramid of feudal patronage? Or can coalition politics be about truly sharing common principles and bravely building consensus?

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I WAS a teenager the first time Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammad and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had their first major political conflict. I'm pushing 40 now, and it feels a little odd that we are in roughly the same place as we were 22 years ago.

It is becoming abundantly clear that if the question can only be shaped as "Dr Mahathir or Anwar?", then the answer will always end up being "neither".

My radical view is that the only way out for Pakatan Harapan is to see if they can ask a different question: How can they go from "Mahathir or Anwar", to "Mahathir and Anwar" — not as boss and subordinate, but as equals.

I have tried to keep most of my writing on the big picture, to avoid falling into the trap of talking about personalities when the real issues are structures and systems.

Today, I will do a little of both.

I don't really buy the narrative that Malaysia is stuck because politicians like these are too selfish to put their differences aside. Rather, I believe that Pakatan is facing this impasse because, in our zero sum version of democracy, second place is merely first loser.

In Malaysia, the Prime Minister controls everything. The largely ceremonial position of Deputy Prime Minister in and of itself has about almost as little significance as that of a government backbencher.

Furthermore, the only truly "powerful" function of our Parliament is to serve as an electoral college for electing the Prime Minister.

As far as determining the direction of government, members of Parliament and leaders of political parties do not really have any significant bargaining chips, except one.

If they do not get what they want, the only powerful card they have to play is to go for broke: voting for a different person to become Prime Minister. A lot of everything else that goes on in Parliament within our current system — to the layman especially — amounts to little beyond sound and fury.

Since the Prime Minister controls