

Anwar's Cabinet line-up: Game theory in practice

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THE announcement of Malaysia's new Cabinet late on Friday night has received a mixed response from the Malaysian public.

Given Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's well-known reform agenda, the biggest upset is probably the appointment of Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who is facing multiple court cases, as a Deputy Prime Minister. However, the line-up is probably an optimum outcome given the circumstances.

Here, game theory may help us understand what happened during negotiations for Cabinet posts.

Game theory is simply strategic interactions between two or more players as each player attempts to further their interests. A player can be any party (individual or group) who has a strategic interest in the outcome. Each player has specific goals and interests, and those interests can be competing. As an example, two (or more) players can be aiming for the same prize, say the post of finance minister.

To start, following the conclusion of the 15th General Election on Nov 19, the reality (the "game") was not ideal for any of the players because no single coalition commanded a simple majority in the Dewan Rakyat. The Prime Minister was appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong from among a group of



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"players" who agreed to form the unity government.

The game of interest is in negotiating for Cabinet posts – who gets what. However, it should be noted that the prizes at stake go beyond Cabinet posts. There are other prizes, potentially more lucrative, that are not visible to the public eye. Therefore, negotiations that have been going on over the past one week could well go beyond chasing after Cabinet posts.

In negotiating, each player attempts to maximise his/her pay-offs (goals and interests). Note that in this "game", failure to reach an agreement would lead to an unstable government, a situation in

which every player would lose (except for a player who has a king-maker role, but that would complicate the game). This could still happen, and as early as Dec 19 when Anwar's position as the prime minister will be tested by a confidence vote in Parliament.

Therefore, each player would have had to come to a compromise during negotiations. No single player could get all his/her wishes. As a simple rule, a player with "higher" seats in the Dewan is expected to get more Cabinet posts, though there could be other rules and constraints that take precedence.

An "equilibrium" is achieved when any further move by any

player would no longer change the outcome of the game. This was when all players had maximised their gains (or expected gains) and the game ended. Cabinet posts were finalised and the Prime Minister announced the outcome, which we saw on Friday night.

In practice, the analysis of game theory is a lot more complicated than this. But I hope that this brief commentary provides a glimpse of what could have been going on in the minds of the "players" in the "game" over the past one week and why the outcome, in the eyes of some of the public, might not be the best.

One thing for sure, despite having to participate in a marriage of convenience of sorts, the Anwar administration must demonstrate true leadership and deliver. As a matter of principle and with utmost priority, the government must serve the public with full integrity and without fear or favour. Then only can the country progress and prosper.

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