



All the pieces matter

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim made headlines when he mentioned in a *Time* magazine interview on Wednesday that he would be open to PAS joining his unity government.

I'm sure there are many vehemently opposed to this. I saw some people write on X (formerly Twitter) something along the lines of "I voted for Anwar precisely to keep PAS out of government".

This is likely to be a very widely held sentiment.

As you can imagine, I am not a big fan of PAS, especially in its present incarnation. But if we look beyond who they are in the here and now, and take a bigger picture view over a longer period of time, perhaps we will gain a slightly different perspective.

Let's dive into the deepest heart of this issue.

People fear PAS being in government because they feel PAS will change the direction of the government.

The question that I think worth asking is this: Will PAS change the behaviour of the government, or will being in government change the behaviour of PAS?

To take yet another step back, we find ourselves once again face to face with this question: Does ideology shape Malaysian politics, or are our ideologies shaped by our politics?

My favourite example in discussing this question hails from the time when Datuk Seri Najib Razak was prime minister, and



Back in the day: (From left) Anwar, PAS leader Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, DAP's Lim Kit Siang and Lim Guang Eng during the swearing-in ceremony of MPs in Parliament in June 2013. PKR, DAP and PAS formed a strong Opposition bloc then because they had similar political goals: to push back Umno and Barisan Nasional during the 2013 General Election. - Filepic/The Star

PM, PAS and possibilities

Should PAS be invited to join the unity government?

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was the deputy with his eye on the top job. At that time, Najib was the champion of the "inclusive" Malaysia.

Around the time Muhyiddin started positioning himself to challenge Najib, he famously declared: "I am Malay first, and Malaysian second."

I interpreted this as a position that was driven and informed not by Muhyiddin's personal convictions, but by his political ambitions and, accordingly, the need to differentiate himself from Najib.

He had a political goal, and thus he looked around for the best narrative that would serve those goals.

This ultra Malay stance saw a 180-degree reversal when Muhyiddin and Bersatu teamed up with Pakatan Harapan in 2018. All of a sudden, Muhyiddin had shifted from "Malay first" to becoming DAP's best friend.

than MCA, while PAS made its living by being more Islamic than Umno. These two parties, were a strong political representation of the two "extremes" in Peninsular Malaysian society.

Needless to say, it was a difficult fit, ideologically. But they made it work, for a while - longer than the first version of Pakatan, anyway.

Ultimately, what made this bridging of two extreme ends of the spectrum possible was shared political goals. It was easier of course, back when there was a common enemy in the form of Umno and Barisan Nasional.

Nevertheless, being in the same coalition tempered both DAP and PAS. Now that they were allies, the extreme tendencies of either party were considerably muted, and this had a noticeable effect on the racial and religious tensions that underlie arguably all of Malaysia's socio-political dynamics.

Coming back to the present, I thus believe that if PAS was to become politically allied with the current government, we would see a dialling down of their divisive racial and religious rhetoric.

I believe this because I believe that PAS is a political party first, and everything else second.

This is the only way I feel we can consistently explain its behaviour over, say, the last

two decades.

I have long believed that in Malaysia, political positioning comes first, and everything else (including ideology) is derived from that position. This is true whether on the level of inter-party competition, or intra-party competition among the party "warlords".

First, you decide who your boss or ally is, and only after that do you find an ideology to justify your political position.

Today, PAS demonises everything about DAP. If they join the government, and are given a piece of the pie, I have a strong feeling they will start singing a very different tune indeed. And if they ever start stirring up discontent again, my bet is that it will be due to dissatisfaction with the size of said piece.

As always, I could be wrong; but I do believe that most PAS leaders care less about ideological positions, policies, and so on, and will be willing to move towards moderation as long as they feel their political and personal goals are being met.

It is worth noting that a party like PAS - unlike Bersatu, or even a party like PKR - has very real grassroots influence. Where it leads, its supporters will follow.

I doubt including PAS in the unity government will make much difference in terms of, say, combating corruption or pushing through institutional reforms.

But I daresay there's a good possibility that we will see much less divisive public rhetoric around race and religion.

Should this come to pass, what would be ideal is for the Prime Minister and his government to avoid the path taken by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 2018 and choose not to engineer any new national narrative.

Instead, they should seize the opportunity - one arguably already squandered in the last year - to frame this unity government as heralding a completely new era for Malaysia: one where we have finally put aside the toxic, counterproductive squabbling over race and religion, and come together to build up this beautiful country into everything it can be.

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