



## It's just politics

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WHO should lead the country's Opposition coalition, Perikatan Nasional? Who should lead one of Perikatan's main drivers, Bersatu?

These are important questions because, as we've seen in countries around the world, a national Opposition bloc can either have a huge impact on politics, offering strong checks and balances to push the government of the day to work better, or it could splinter into irrelevance.

On Friday, I had coffee in Kuala Lumpur with two analysts from Ilham Centre, a political think tank. Of course, the subject of the chat was politics, especially the Ayer Kuning by-election in Perak (a foregone conclusion that Umno will win - it is just a matter of majority), Sabah politics (messy and fluid), and Perikatan leadership (sticky).

According to Ilham Centre executive director Hisommudin Bakar, the push for a change in Perikatan leadership is coming from PAS. The Islamist party wants Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin replaced as the coalition's chairman, he said.

"In other words, a candidate qualified to lead Perikatan to face GE16," Hisommudin said, refer-



Who is better suited? Muhyiddin (left) and Hamzah at Bersatu's general assembly in December last year. The party president and deputy president both have their supporters when it comes to who should lead. — MUHAMAD SHAHRIL ROSLI/The Star

# Coalition contradictions

The Opposition coalition is no monolith, it seems, as questions swirl about who is fit to lead it.

ring to the 16th General Election that must be called by February 2028.

The stand of PAS, he said, is that Perikatan must be brave in naming Opposition leader Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainudin of Bersatu as the coalition's leader and prime minister candidate.

The situation, the analyst said, has dragged on too long, beginning when Perikatan worked to form a government after GE15 in 2022 and remaining until now. He said it was not resolved clearly as Bersatu had no real consensus on the matter because its president's stand kept on changing.

"Muhyiddin earlier said he wanted to undur diri [retreat] as president because he was facing court cases. But at a Bersatu convention [in November 2023], he changed his tune, saying that his

wife had asked him to continue to lead," Hisommudin said.

"Whatever the excuse, it is causing the strength of Perikatan to taper."

Hisommudin pointed out that this could be seen in the gerakkerja (working cooperation) of Perikatan in the Ayer Kuning by-election. Bersatu, he observed, was not helping PAS wholeheartedly, unlike during GE15 or the six state elections in 2023.

The think tank's director noted that the danger of Perikatan's leadership issue is that it could damage the coalition's solid brand: "If the two parties don't solve it, voters will lose trust in the coalition that defeated Umno in Malay majority seats," he said.

"They have to manage this polemic so that it is not debated in public," he said, adding that it

is especially important the issue does not catch the attention of the young voters who supported Perikatan as they would be disillusioned by Malay parties fighting among themselves.

On why PAS prefers Hamzah to Muhyiddin, Hisommudin said the Islamist party believes that to bring down the Federal Government, the PM candidate must not have a problem with the Palace and must not be facing any court cases.

"That is how Hamzah's name appeared to represent Perikatan. But it changed to Muhyiddin, which made PAS uncomfortable," he said.

On who would make a better political operative to lead Perikatan, Ilham Centre research fellow Mujibu Abd Muis said it is Hamzah, the Bersatu deputy president formerly from Umno. Hamzah, he pointed out, had credibility as he is a politician who could "operate" with the government and PAS.

"Not Muhyiddin, as the government can't approach him nor can he negotiate," he said, listing as an example the Perikatan demand for Opposition MPs' allocation which has still not been settled.

On whether there is a move in Bersatu to replace Muhyiddin as president, Mujibu said there is something happening inside the

party, but there is no "desakan berat dan besar besaran" (heavy and massive pressure).

It would be better for Bersatu to rely on Hamzah as president rather than on Muhyiddin with all his baggage, he said.

However, the research fellow did not see Muhyiddin being pushed out any time soon: "It is not easy. The party grassroots still has a soft spot for Muhyiddin instead of Hamzah," he said.

Hisommudin feels the pressure comes from PAS, which has made kata dua (demand) on the issue.

"But if it doesn't come from the mouth of Muhyiddin that he will retreat or give way, it will not happen," he said.

He added: "I don't think he will retreat."

My final question to the two analysts was, "Who could bring down the government?"

"To bring down the government, you need Umno and GPS. Who can attract them? You need someone with a connection to figures in Umno," Hisommudin said.

"The best is someone from PAS," Mujibu said. "A good operator is Y who is..."

We discussed who and why. However, I will save that for another article, if I do write about it.

Hint: It is not Muhyiddin.