

Deadly enemies become allies in bid to oust Najib
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Opposition avoids naming prime ministerial choice, in part because the parties are unable to agree among themselves.

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's opposition is seeking to rally supporters by promising to get leader Anwar Ibrahim out of jail if it wins the next election, and then install him as prime minister.

In a bid to pull it off, Anwar is joining forces with the man who first put him in prison nearly 20 years ago — former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad — as an unlikely alliance grows between the former sworn enemies.

The opposition Pakatan Harapan would need a temporary prime minister if it manages to unseat Najib Razak's ruling coalition, given Anwar would be behind bars. Last week it named Mahathir as its chairman, raising the prospect the 92 year old could be the one installed as premier.

It's unclear when exactly the alliance will decide who'd be its interim prime minister, but it may not have long. While the election must be called by mid-2018, there is talk it could come later this year.

The approach reflects an effort to build momentum behind Anwar and present a more unified front by an opposition made up of disparate parties that has struggled to gain ground against a coalition in power for 60 years. Still, it's unclear if Anwar, who has been in prison since 2015 on sodomy charges he denies, and who failed to remove Najib in the 2013 election, still holds broad appeal.

The move is based on a tenuous rapprochement between Mahathir and the man who was his deputy in the late 1990s during the Asian financial crisis. After Mahathir fired Anwar in 1998, Anwar spent the next six years in prison on convictions for abuse of power and sodomy.

Seat Coordination

“The only significance I see from this is that it prevents these parties, Pakatan Harapan parties, from contesting against each other,” said Oh Ei Sun, principal adviser to the Pacific Research Center in Malaysia. “I hope that, therefore, they would be able to better coordinate their seat allocation so that they would have a one-to-one fight” against Najib, he said.

The Pakatan Harapan alliance does not include one opposition party — Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) — raising the prospect of multiple opposition candidates contesting seats.

“I don’t see this Mahathir-Anwar reconciliation as something that will attract more support,” Oh added. “I see it simply as a consolidation of existing support for the opposition.”

Anwar was named de facto leader of Pakatan Harapan in the line-up announced late last week for the grouping that includes Mahathir’s newly-formed party. Mahathir was announced as chairman, and Anwar’s wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail appointed president.

Royal Pardon

The group would appoint an interim prime minister if it won power, Mahathir told reporters at the briefing last week, adding the alliance’s choice for the role would be announced soon. Pakatan Harapan would seek Anwar’s release via a royal pardon within a week of forming a government, the Star newspaper reported, citing Mahathir.

The comments renew questions over a potential role for Mahathir, who left office in 2003 and is the country’s longest-serving leader. Once a staunch Najib ally, Mahathir has spent the last two years campaigning for his removal amid a steady flow of corruption allegations that the premier has denied. Mahathir’s party seeks to woo Malay voters, the dominant ethnic group away from Najib’s coalition, but faces an uphill battle in rural areas.

The nonagenarian was cited as saying in June that he was willing to temporarily become premier if there was no acceptable candidate from elsewhere in the opposition. His aide didn’t reply to an email seeking comment on whether Mahathir would agree to stand in until Anwar could be released from prison.

Najib has called on Mahathir to clarify his position on Anwar, given his prior claims against him. “He even said Anwar was an immoral leader who could not lead the country,” Najib told reporters, according to the Malay Mail Online.

No Agreement

The opposition has avoided naming their prime ministerial choice, in part because the parties haven't been able to agree among themselves. In a statement last month, Anwar said he won't offer himself as a candidate as he wanted the focus to remain on the elections rather than who would lead the opposition. He didn't say what the plans would be if the opposition won power.

Last September, Mahathir showed up at the high court where Anwar was filing an interim injunction to try and stop the government from enforcing the newly-passed National Security Act. They shook hands in an event widely seen as historic for the allies-turned nemeses.

"If twenty years ago anyone had said that the prime minister and deputy prime minister from 1997 would still be offered as the top leaders in 2017, that would have been regarded as an outlandish prediction," said Sholto Byrnes, a senior fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia.

"That the opposition is relying on their former foes of 20 years ago shows a huge lack of confidence in their own ranks and strikes many Malaysians as a thoroughly bizarre spectacle."

Pakatan Harapan aims to remove the government led by Najib while returning public funds lost through scandal-hit state fund 1Malaysia Development Bhd., the group has said. It also seeks to reform laws and institutions related to the power of the prime minister and would limit premiers to two terms in power. 1MDB has denied any wrongdoing.

Still, the election will be decided less by the scandals and more by living cost issues for rural voters and the urban poor, who are dependent on the "largesse of the incumbent government," said Oh, who was Najib's political secretary from 2009 to 2011. "Perhaps they are more amenable to material attractions, simply because they are poor."

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