

## **Expect more racial rhetoric as PH and Umno woo Malays**

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### **Report says Umno's use of race following the revelation of the Pakatan Harapan leadership structure shows it fears the opposition coalition may slice into its Malay vote bank.**

KUALA LUMPUR: With the Pakatan Harapan (PH) poised to offer a serious challenge to its stranglehold on Malaysian politics, Umno is ratcheting up the racial rhetoric.

According to a report in The Straits Times (ST) this is because it fears it is losing its grip on the crucial Malay vote bank after former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad formally took charge of the opposition last Friday.

The ST report said with the general election due in a year's time, politicians and analysts expect to see "increased pandering to Malay-Muslim insecurities" in the coming months.

Vriens & Partners political analyst Adib Zalkapli told the ST: "Umno has to work extra hard to defend its turf as Barisan Nasional's (BN) ethnic minority parties have so far not mounted a credible challenge against the opposition... leading to a more racially tinged campaign from both sides."

Mahathir was Umno president for more than two decades before retiring in 2003. Now, he is out to topple current Umno president Najib Razak.

The report said despite civil society having misgivings, PH aimed to use Mahathir's influence to break Umno's stranglehold on the Malay community that made up the majority in more than half of the parliamentary constituencies.

There is speculation that Prime Minister Najib Razak will call for election after the Aug 19-30 SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur and on Sunday, Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said polls would be held after September.

The report said observers had earlier expected the lion's share of the Malay votes to go to the BN and PAS, which left the opposition in 2015 after accusing Chinese-dominated DAP of being anti-Islam. But, it added, Mahathir's "pre-eminence has reset calculations and reignited the battle for Malay support".

It noted that Umno started the racial rhetoric last weekend, insisting that Mahathir was only a puppet, and that the DAP held the real power in the PH as it had the most lawmakers among the four PH partners.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Shahidan Kassim said, "This is how the opposition clouds the matter. If DAP is not the leader, they are pretending. How can the party with the least seats become the leader?" He was referring to the fact that PPBM, which is chaired by Mahathir, has only one MP.

Rural and Regional Development Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob also warned that "we Malays will be split into three... DAP will have the most seats and, constitutionally, they are entitled to decide who will be prime minister".

The ST report said Najib, on the other hand, took a more nuanced approach by asking Mahathir to take a clear stance on the repeated charges of sexual misconduct against Anwar, who is currently in jail after a 2015 conviction for sodomy, considered highly taboo for Muslims.

"Does Dr Mahathir still stand by his 1998 statement accusing Anwar of unnatural acts? He even said Anwar was a leader without honour, and cannot lead the country," said Najib, referring to what Mahathir had said when he sacked Anwar, who was deputy prime minister, that year.

The ST report quoted DAP stalwart Lim Kit Siang as saying that Umno was just panicking over PH's new leadership structure, where top positions were held by Malays.

"We can now see a new carefully crafted propaganda strategy – to run down the Mahathir-Anwar (Ibrahim) reconciliation," Lim was quoted as saying.

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