

## **Is Mahathir really the 'top dog'?**

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**By Nawar Firdaws**

**PKR Youth leader Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad says he is, but only while PH's choice for PM, Anwar Ibrahim, is in prison.**

PETALING JAYA: Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Tuesday pronounced himself as Pakatan Harapan's (PH) "top dog", drawing parallels between his new post in the opposition coalition to that held by Barisan Nasional (BN) chairman and Prime Minister Najib Razak.

His remarks appeared to be at odds with how PH wants its leadership structure to be seen, where the three top leaders – de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim, chairman Mahathir, and president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail – work together as equals.

So is Mahathir really the "top dog", especially when three of the coalition's four components are constantly calling for Anwar to be made the prime minister, and Wan Azizah the interim, instead of the 92-year-old?

According to PKR Youth leader Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, he is, but only while Anwar is in prison.

"Our structure is very clear, when we came up with our list of leadership, Anwar was at the top. It's just that Anwar is currently in prison. So as of now, yes, Mahathir plays the leading role.

"But the agreement the four parties reached was that Anwar would be appointed the prime minister after the whole process of pardon and release was completed.

"If you are the prime minister, you are the main person in the coalition," he said to FMT.

Saari Sungib, who leads a group of former reformasi activists called Otai Reformis, concurred, saying in anything involving discussions and decision-making, Mahathir will be the top dog. But the chairman is not going to run the country, he said.

"His responsibility is to steer the party and ensure true democracy takes place, by providing the necessary checks and balance.

"The way we see it, if we win the general election, the president will be the prime minister, while the others in the leadership line-up would become the cabinet ministers," Saari told FMT.

Mahathir's rise in PH had ruffled the feathers of the coalition's original supporters, especially reformasi activists.

English daily The Star recently reported that Anwar's hardcore supporters have felt betrayed by this, and that the Otai Reformasi group's secretary Razak Ismail had threatened to resign and join Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) instead.

Saari admitted that Mahathir's new role hasn't gone down well with some in the group, saying there are those who are even considering leaving the reformasi movement altogether.

But for PH in general, including activists like Saari, the alliance with Mahathir and PPBM, that has been at times dubbed "Umno 2.0", is necessary to take down the "greater evil", that is, the Najib administration.

"We still hold on to our stand that Mahathir had violated basic rights by arresting people under the Internal Security Act (ISA), abused his powers and was responsible for financial mismanagement.

"And he still hasn't repented or admitted he has committed any wrongdoing. But we are facing a big threat right now, by the current government."

He also said that Otai Reformasi would have an emergency meeting today, to iron out all issues surrounding this latest development.

Nik Nazmi, meanwhile, assured PH supporters, especially those from PKR who were part of the 1998 Reformasi movement, that PKR is still very important to the coalition despite Mahathir, who is also the PPBM chairman, leading the charge for now.

"It's just that today's political landscape requires all of them to work together, to fight the greater evil, the BN-led government.

"Mahathir has accepted Anwar as the de facto leader, and also as the candidate for the eight prime minister. That says a lot about what Anwar has been able to achieve.

"I'm sure a lot of us, when we were fighting in 1998, couldn't imagine that happening. But now, the scenario is that we are facing Najib. So all of us across the board have to work together."

### **PPBM similar to Umno**

The opposition has time and time again tried and failed to take down BN. While their former coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, had provided formidable competition to the latter, it wasn't enough to convince voters, especially the Malays in the rural areas, to switch their support.

With PAS now out of the picture, the Malay votes would be even more divided. While Amanah is attempting to replace the Islamist party, their strength is still relatively untested.

This is where Mahathir and PPBM comes in.

“Mahathir can get us the support of the Malays who have been supporting Umno. They won’t go for PAS or Amanah, they will go for PPBM, a party that is more similar to Umno,” Saari said.

Mahathir had led Umno for over two decades, before stepping down in 2003. Last year, he quit the party for the second time in 10 years, claiming it has become a Najib-centric party instead of one that is dedicated to protecting the Malays and the country.

He then formed his own political outfit, PPBM, whose members were largely former Umno supporters and leaders, including sacked deputy president Muhyiddin Yassin.

But questions have arisen as to whether Mahathir and PPBM leaders would end up making a PH government similar to Umno’s.

Independent political analyst Khoo Kay Peng believes it wouldn’t happen. He said PH component parties are unlike BN’s. The opposition coalition parties are headstrong and “quarrelsome”, while BN components accept there is one dominant party which is Umno, he explained.

“All PH components see themselves as equals, but in BN, there’s definitely one top dog, that is Umno.

“So each of them would want their way. That’s how and why they broke up a few times. So it definitely won’t be like BN and Umno,” he said.

As for lingering concerns that Mahathir is eyeing the prime minister’s post again, Khoo said such worries were unfounded – despite the former’s remarks about being “top dog”.

Given Mahathir’s age, he said “there would be something wrong” if people think the nanogenarian still wants to be prime minister.

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