

The Economist: Opposition in sorry state if it needs Dr M
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Unable to find any credible young leader, opposition depends on an old war horse like Dr Mahathir Mohamad, but this may be a godsend, notes the respected magazine.

KUALA LUMPUR: The fact that former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, at 91, is being thought of by the opposition as its prime ministerial candidate shows the messy situation in Pakatan Harapan (PH).

The Economist also notes there are still some in PKR who hold out the possibility of Anwar Ibrahim – who is in jail on a sodomy charge – becoming prime minister if the PH wins the next general election.

By failing to nurture, or even to agree upon, the next generation of leaders, PH has played straight into the hands of Umno, it says.

Describing this as a “depressing mess, even by Malaysia’s dismal standards”, The Economist adds: “The opposition bears no blame for the dirty tricks which, over several shameful decades, the government has used to hobble Mr Anwar and many others.”

It theorises about the possibility that the thought of Mahathir becoming prime minister will, at last, force the PH to thrust a younger leader to the fore. Some suspect, The Economist says, that this is what the shrewd strategist in Dr Mahathir wants.

“But it is also possible that, facing only uncomfortable options, they will end up making no decision at all. Some in Pakatan seem happy to barrel into the next election without telling voters who will lead Malaysia should they win. That might seem like pragmatism, but it is really just defeatism.”

Talking about Mahathir, The Economist raised the question: “Can Malaysia’s opposition really find no more palatable leader?” It quotes Mahathir supporters as saying that these are desperate times and such measures are needed.

Noting that Mahathir has lately been hinting that he would consider another stint in the top job, The Economist says it is difficult to imagine a more unlikely turn of events.

It reminds that the “original incarnation of the coalition Dr Mahathir might soon be running was formed in the late 1990s to oppose his own interminable rule”.

“What makes all this even tougher to stomach is that Dr Mahathir’s conversion to the opposition’s cause looks disturbingly incomplete. Though he is hobnobbing with former enemies, the old codger still finds it difficult to apologise for the excesses of his tenure.”

The Economist says one might expect the 1Malaysia Development Bhd scandal to propel PH into power at the coming election, but, no, the opposition looks likely to lose ground. It may even hand back to Umno and its allies the two-thirds majority required to amend the constitution.

The respected magazine notes: “This bizarre reversal has much to do with Malaysia’s regrettable racial politics: the Malay-Muslim majority largely favours the government and the big ethnic-Chinese and -Indian minorities tend to vote against it.

“Mr Najib has baited an Islamist party into renewing calls for more flogging for moral lapses, forcing them to leave Pakatan. The split in the opposition will lead to lots of three-candidate races, in which Umno will romp home.

“Put in this context, Dr Mahathir’s reappearance is a godsend. It stands to transform Pakatan’s chances by granting access to a broad swathe of rural constituencies that they had previously thought unwinnable.”

The Economist says many Malays have fond memories of the booming economy of Dr Mahathir’s era, and that in their eyes, he put Malaysia on the map.

“As coalition chairman, Dr Mahathir might also bring some order to Pakatan’s noisy council meetings. His backing could be invaluable after a narrow victory or in a hung parliament, when Umno’s creatures in the bureaucracy might be expected to put up a fight.

“All these benefits could probably be obtained without offering to make Dr Mahathir the prime minister. But he may be the only front man upon whom most of the coalition can agree.”

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