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Malaysia's New Opposition Party Bersatu: Balancing Potential with Public Image

By Saleena Saleem

Synopsis

Malaysia's newest opposition party, Bersatu, will struggle to win seats in the country's next general election if it cannot overcome its leaders' political baggage and some key problems with its public image. Bersatu's potential to be a spoiler, or even a longer-term alternative, to UMNO cannot be ruled out.

Commentary

SPECULATION IS rife that Malaysia's 14th general election which must be held by August 2018, may be called this year. The general election come after a protracted political scandal over state wealth fund 1MDB, with damaging financial mismanagement and corruption allegations levelled at Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Several former leaders from the ruling political party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), have left and regrouped into a new Malay nationalist opposition, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu). Led by former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad as chairman and former deputy premier Muhyiddin Yassin as president, Bersatu will need to sell itself to a jaded public if it is to pass as a credible contender for UMNO's Malay voter base.

Public Perception Challenges

These public perception challenges stem from the former UMNO leaders' decisions and actions. At the height of the 1MDB scandal in mid-2015, the expectation that UMNO leaders, particularly Mahathir and Muhyiddin, would lead a massive break-away faction of dissatisfied party members when Najib was at his political weakest, did not materialise.

Instead, they fought for control of UMNO from within for nearly a year. It wasn't until February 2016 that Mahathir left his old party – for the second time. It was a missed opportunity that gave Najib ample time to build support for his leadership within the various UMNO groups and to present a united front. As a high-profile frontman for Bersatu, Mahathir's actions during this period may prove problematic for four key reasons as the new party targets the Malay vote.

First, while still in UMNO, Mahathir associated with pro-opposition civil society groups such as Bersih. Mahathir's participation in the Bersih 4 rally, which was widely seen as a Chinese-dominated anti-Najib demonstration, leaves him vulnerable to the PM Najib's race-based argument that should Malays fail to support him, the government would fall to a Chinese-led political machine. Given Bersatu's alliance with the opposition coalition, of which the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) is a key player, such fears can be magnified to its detriment during an election campaign.

Second, Mahathir initially stated he had no intention of establishing a political party upon quitting UMNO, but he did precisely that in late 2016. The timing of his departure from UMNO, which came only after his son, Mukhriz, was forced to resign as the Kedah chief minister by pro-Najib UMNO members, provides ample ammunition to those who claim Mahathir is primarily motivated by his son's political ambitions rather than a genuine concern for Malaysia's future.

Inevitability of Electoral Pacts

Third, Mahathir's past ideological differences, and the harsh treatment of civil society activists and political foes while he was in government, many of whom he associates with today, leaves him open to charges of hypocrisy. For example, during the Asian Financial Crisis in the 1990s, Mahathir clashed over economic policies with his then-deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. This set the stage for Anwar's imprisonment on charges of sodomy, and his rise as an opposition leader of the Reformasi movement, which advocated an open society and economy.

Mahathir has curtailed fundamental liberties that the opposition stands for – he used the Internal Security Act to imprison DAP's leader Lim Kit Siang during Operation Lalang in 1987, after government appointments in Chinese vernacular schools spurred an outcry.

Fourth, Mahathir's criticism of Najib's alleged misdeeds over 1MDB leaves him exposed to scrutiny over his own actions while he was prime minister. He already faces criticism over the Bumiputera Malaysia Finance Limited scandal in the 1980s, and the central bank's forex losses of US\$10 billion in the 1990s, although Mahathir's camp claims the two are not comparable.

Bersatu enters into an opposition political landscape that is already divided, and where the various parties now jostle to re-negotiate the terms of a political arrangement for the upcoming elections. A January survey by INVOKE, an opposition-linked NGO, found that a three-cornered fight between the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (which includes Bersatu), the Islamist party, Parti Islam

Se-Malaysia (PAS) and the ruling party, Barisan Nasional benefits the incumbent government. This makes electoral pacts essential, even as the different ideological bents and histories of the parties in the opposition complicate matters.

Looking Beyond Opposition's Intractable Difficulties

The previous opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, saw public bickering among its constituent parties over various issues leading eventually to its collapse. Two examples are the political impasse that ensued over disagreements on the Selangor chief minister post in 2014 and PAS' renewed focus on implementing *hudud* (criminal punishment).

The lack of agreement on seat allocations between remaining coalition parties, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and DAP, during the 2016 Sarawak state elections, and the recent DAP resignations of its elected representatives over simmering grievances from the past coalition pact with PAS, reinforce the perception that the opposition face intractable difficulties in maintaining a cohesive front.

Furthermore, the opposition's current narrative on "Save Malaysia from Najib", which was built on Mahathir's short-lived "Save Malaysia" movement may not be as compelling for voters compared to calls for change based on democratic ideals of equality, justice and fairness for all races, and which were emphasised during the previous two general elections.

When Mahathir recently criticised investment projects in Johor from China, he utilised the race-oriented tactics of the past, which can be off-putting to some voters who had been drawn to the opposition in the first place.

Nevertheless, although Bersatu carries the baggage of its founding members, it is a new political party with the potential to grow in strength if it can sustain itself beyond its immediate challenges. No doubt Bersatu is a potential spoiler for UMNO. Addressing public perception issues and becoming a serious contender to UMNO may increasingly require the introduction of a younger generation of politicians.

With the senior generation playing the role of mentors, this new generation could do much to project the future direction of Bersatu as a viable political party — one that looks beyond the objective of unseating Najib.

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