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WILL ANWAR TAKE OVER? Malaysian Politics at the Crossroads

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As the threat of an Anwar take-over of the government looms large, the strains on the Malaysian political system are growing. Will Pandora's Box burst open leading to fundamental political changes, or will the UMNO-centred status quo prove too entrenched to be uprooted?

DON'T expect UMNO to take lying down Anwar Ibrahim's Sept 16 threat – of taking over the government on Malaysia Day today. If party leaders initially made light of it, notice how the tone and attitude have changed. Prime Minister and UMNO president Abdullah Ahmad Badawi now talks about stopping Anwar in his tracks. If it takes moving a mountain to achieve this, so be it. Hence, there is nothing surprising about the sudden overseas junket for a group of MPs, including potential defectors from the UMNO-led ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN). Nor of last week's security crackdown.

There is just too much at stake. More than the loss of power for UMNO, the prospect of Malaysia's political system being undone or turned on its head is real. If that happens, it will amount to an unprecedented political coup, if not a revolution. Today -- on Sept 16, the day Malaysia was formed in 1963 -- we will know whether that fundamental change will come, or whether the status quo is simply too entrenched to be uprooted.

The "agricultural study trip" to Taiwan by the BN MPs does suggest some panic on the part of BN. But roadblock No 1 seems to have partly worked. Anwar's Sept 16 deadline appears to have at least been delayed, if not derailed.

Roadblocks No 2, 3 and 4

Having failed at Permatang Pauh, UMNO will now focus on Anwar's upcoming sodomy trial, which has been postponed to Sept 24. Going by Sodomy I in 1999, Sodomy II can be expected to produce all manner of surprises by the prosecution to send Anwar back to jail. Remember the mattress parade ten years ago? And remember the slew of "victims" who claimed to have been sodomised by Anwar, only to retract the accusations later? We should expect nothing less in terms of drama and shock value.

Expect also the prosecution to come up with forensic evidence that Anwar will have difficulty to rebut.

In short, no stone will be left unturned; Anwar has to be taken out of the system. If need be, revoke his bail – something Anwar’s party fears. This will disrupt the opposition’s plan to replace the BN as the party in power. Without the charismatic glue that keeps the disparate opposition together, the whole opposition edifice will crumble. But Abdullah is not the Machiavellian type who would manipulate the courts. Should bail be extended instead, and Sodomy II fail to stop him, what other options are there for UMNO to derail Anwar’s march to Putrajaya?

For one, Abdullah can declare an emergency – on the grounds that the country is entering a period of instability. The emergency option has been thoroughly studied by the government since the electoral debacle of March 8. Now, the military chief has even raised – twice -- the spectre of chaos and calling on the government to act. It is unprecedented for the top general to speak out like that. It was to prevent Pandora’s Box of ethnic strife from blowing open that the Sept 12 Internal Security Act arrests were made. Will this be the ideal cover for Abdullah to play the emergency card?

Alternatively, if Abdullah senses that power is slipping away, but he overcomes fresh internal dissent to remain as UMNO president, he could dissolve parliament and call a snap general election. If BN is going to lose power through defection, why not go to the polls again and try to turn the tide? That, however, could backfire; BN could well be thrown out altogether this time around. Still, notice how the snap election option is being contemplated by at least one state controlled by UMNO -- Negri Sembilan. Now, this could have a snowball effect.

Sept 16, or none at all?

What are the chances of Anwar succeeding in his Sept 16 project, or now Sept 20 -- or whatever the new date will be?

Given the flux surrounding Sept 16, and the options that UMNO could resort to, it should not be any surprise if Anwar failed to announce his take-over today as planned. His credibility would be further dented if UMNO proved right in its allegation that money politics had been involved in Anwar’s defection strategy. But his credibility appears to be salvaged somewhat when he announced today that he had the numbers – backed by evidence – to form the government.

His demand for a meeting with Abdullah to discuss a smooth transition of power has however been ignored by the premier. It is still unclear how many BN MPs Anwar has succeeded in wooing over, though he claimed to have more than necessary to form the government. In a letter to the premier on Sept 15, he had issued a four-point demand: that MPs are not stopped from switching over; that the ISA not be used to detain defecting or opposition MPs; that a state of emergency not be declared; and that there be no roadblocks to stop MPs from going to Parliament.

Should we believe Anwar? Would he be brazen enough to issue such demands if he did not have the basis? Such posture of confidence is consistent with two previous occasions when he has been proven right. Firstly, on the eve of the March 8 general election, when BN was pounding the victory drums, he declared that “tomorrow, Pakatan Rakyat will form the government”. Not many believed him then, of course, but he had the last laugh: For the first time since 1969, the opposition captured power in five out of the 13 states, even shockingly denying the ruling coalition its two-thirds majority in the federal parliament.

More recently, in his Permatang Pauh by-election of Aug 26, UMNO had predicted a moral victory for its own candidate. A reduced majority for Anwar would be enough to embarrass the opposition icon. But Anwar won as predicted -- and by a bigger majority. Given the frequency of events turning out in

his favour, it would be risky to dismiss him as delusional about taking over the government.

The Unravelling of BN?

As Anwar's goal of taking over Putrajaya comes within reach, the trend towards uncertainty grows. The BN as a coalition is under threat of unravelling. The UMNO leadership is split over the ISA arrests and the law minister has resigned in protest. As the pressure mounts on UMNO, the ethnic faultlines widen. Race relations between UMNO and two Chinese-based coalition partners, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Gerakan, have become frayed.

If MCA and Gerakan pulled out, BN's raison d'être as a coalition representing the major races will be undermined. Conversely, the credibility of Anwar's Pakatan Rakyat as an alternative model for multiracial coalition politics will grow. This will quicken the seeming restructuring of the political system, triggered by March 8. Anwar may well confound everyone yet again, and in the end take over. But it would be foolhardy of him to write off UMNO just yet. Going by the lessons of other countries, established dominant parties have a way of coming back from the brink – again and again.

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