

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Malaysia's Bersatu Remains Split and Faces Uncertain Future

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The appointment of Muhyiddin Yassin as Malaysia's 8th Prime Minister has been both a boon and a bane for his party, Bersatu (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia). Muhyiddin's faction is in the current Perikatan Nasional (PN) government, while Mahathir's faction remains with the Pakatan Harapan (PH) opposition.
- Fierce infighting within the party continues to be played out in public, with spokespersons from the rival factions issuing conflicting statements in the party's name. On 28 May 2020, Muhyiddin's faction declared that Mahathir and four other Bersatu MPs were no longer Bersatu members because they sat together with the opposition during the 18 May parliament sitting.
- Mahathir commands a smaller group of MPs than Muhyiddin, but the PH coalition still sees Mahathir's stature as useful to offset their dwindling support among Malay-Muslim voters and to garner support from East Malaysian parties.
- On the other hand, Muhyiddin's faction is unlikely to be treated as a senior partner in the PN coalition after the next election, which will be held before 2023. The largest block in the PN, UMNO, straddles two separate coalitions: BN (Barisan Nasional) with non-Malay parties; and MN (Muafakat Nasional) with PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia). The Umno Supreme Council has indicated that the cooperation with Bersatu will only last until the next general election.
- The next Bersatu General Assembly, to be held sometime this year, will be a crucial showdown between the Muhyiddin and Mahathir factions. Initially, Muhyiddin sought to reconcile with Mahathir, but Mahathir continues to undermine Muhyiddin's government by seeking a vote of no confidence in parliament. This article examines the likely scenarios for Bersatu which is on the brink of collapse.

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## INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2020, Dr Mahathir Mohamad resigned as the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the Chairman of his party Bersatu (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia).<sup>1</sup> His resignations were triggered by infighting within the party as well as the broader PH (Pakatan Harapan) coalition. Three days before that, PH leaders from component parties Amanah (Parti Amanah Negara), Bersatu, DAP (Democratic Action Party), and PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat) had met and reached a consensus that Mahathir should stay on as prime minister. No timeline was set for him to hand over power to PKR president Anwar Ibrahim.<sup>2</sup> On 23rd February, some Bersatu and PKR leaders held a meeting with leaders of the opposition from Umno (United Malays National Organization) and PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) at the Sheraton Hotel in Kuala Lumpur to plot a move that would lead to PH government's downfall. The move, referred to as the "Sheraton Move", also fractured Bersatu.

From the fall of the PH government to 1 March 2020, when Bersatu president Muhyiddin Yassin was sworn in as Malaysia's 8<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister, Bersatu leaders and MPs tried to salvage the situation but could not reach an agreement. Mahathir desired for Bersatu to remain in PH, while Muhyiddin thought otherwise. Mahathir later said that even his political secretary Zahid Mat Arip disagreed with him, insisting that Bersatu leaves PH.<sup>3</sup> The future of Bersatu was in limbo with Mahathir giving mixed signals. On 27 February, the Bersatu Supreme Council released a media statement which rejected his stepping down as chairman, and he later retracted his resignation.<sup>4</sup> The Bersatu MPs who wanted the party to leave PH outnumbered those who preferred to stay in the coalition. On the other hand, the MPs outside of Bersatu could not settle on whether to support Mahathir, Anwar Ibrahim, Umno president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi or any other candidate for prime minister. To break the deadlock, the Malaysian King intervened and named Muhyiddin as prime minister.<sup>5</sup> To be the prime minister, the person needs to command majority support in parliament of at least 112 MPs. However, in this case, the exact number of MPs supporting Muhyiddin was not revealed.

What lies ahead for Bersatu? To be sure, the party is fighting for its survival. Muhyiddin's faction has six times more MPs than Mahathir's. 21 Bersatu MPs support Muhyiddin while only five support Mahathir, including his son Mukhriz, who is also the party's deputy president. At least 10 MPs who jumped ship from PKR (People's Justice Party) to join Bersatu further boosted Muhyiddin's numbers to 31. Muhyiddin's lead over Mahathir neither indicates the sentiments of Bersatu's rank and file, grassroots, nor the Supreme Council. More crucially for the party, PH on the one hand, and BN (National Front) and MN (Muafakat Nasional) on the other hand, are treating it as a junior partner. With these two coalitions solidifying, Bersatu is left with little choice but to unite and probably form a third coalition in order to survive. If not, MPs from the Muhyiddin faction may have to settle for being absorbed back into Umno, the party it originated from.

## THE BREAKING UP OF BERSATU

Bersatu is currently in an unprecedented position in Malaysian politics because its members are represented in both the government and the opposition. The division within Bersatu can be observed on three fronts. First, Mahathir disagreed to work with Umno *en bloc*, although he never discounted the possibility of working with Umno leaders who are "clean", or with

no pending corruption trials. He urged Muhyiddin's faction to give him time. In a speech after being appointed interim prime minister, Mahathir said: "I am willing to accept Umno members if they leave Umno and join other parties. But Umno would be joining this coalition government as Umno. I would not accept this."<sup>6</sup>

Second, party leaders disagree on who is in control of the party. Bersatu secretary-general Wira Marzuki Yahya is pro-Mahathir, but Muhyiddin replaced him with Hamzah Zainudin with effect from 18 March. Hamzah is currently serving Muhyiddin as Home Minister. There are differences in how both camps interpret the party constitution; the Mahathir faction says that the chairman must be consulted before any changes to the secretary-general position can be made, while the opposing camp argues that Muhyiddin is acting chairman.<sup>7</sup> The Muhyiddin camp argues that Mahathir is no longer in charge of the party after he resigned as chairman, even though he retracted his resignation. The Mahathir camp thinks the senior member remains in charge. The matter initially reached a temporary truce after Mahathir's position as chairman was unchallenged in the upcoming party polls. However, on 5 May the Registrar of Societies (RoS) validated Mahathir's resignation, and declared Muhyiddin the Acting Chairman. Through his lawyer, Mahathir disputed the letter and sought a legal recourse. On 28 May, the party terminated the membership of Mahathir and four other Bersatu MPs—Mukhriz Mahathir, Amiruddin Hamzah, Maszlee Malik and Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman—because they sat with the opposition during the parliament sitting on 18 May. The MPs affected are challenging the decision.

Even before the move to oust Mahathir from the party, the authority of the chairman remains doubtful. Some Bersatu leaders argue that as chairman, Mahathir must heed decisions made by the supreme council and cannot act unilaterally. To illustrate, on 4<sup>th</sup> May, Mahathir signed a media statement on behalf of Bersatu together with Warisan (Parti Warisan Sabah) president Shafie Apdal and other leaders from the PH parties, DAP, PKR and Amanah.<sup>8</sup> The statement called for the scheduled 18 May parliament sitting to go beyond the one day. On 7 May, Bersatu information chief issued a media statement stating that Mahathir does not represent the party's views and went against its decision.<sup>9</sup> In a separate media statement issued on the same day, Wira—who still signs off as the party secretary-general—stated in a strongly worded letter that in the last supreme council meeting held on 24 February, only two matters were agreed upon: the rejection of Mahathir's resignation as Chairman; and for Mahathir to be the only candidate for prime minister. Thus, Wira contends that the notion of automatic dismissal for Mahathir does not apply.<sup>10</sup> On 9 May, Radzi Jidin issued a public statement disputing Wira's claims, also using Bersatu's official letter head.<sup>11</sup> There were rumours that on 11 May, a Supreme Council meeting was planned but did not extend the invitation to Mahathir and Mukhriz.<sup>12</sup> The meeting was later postponed.

The split between Wira and Hamzah manifests division within the supreme council as well. Made up of 25 members, some party heavyweights are Mahathir supporters, including Abdul Kadir Jasin, Abu Bakar Yahya, Tarik Ismail Mustafa, Syed Saddiq Abdul Rahman, Akhramsyah Muammar Ubaidah Sanusi, and Ulya Husamudin, while the rest support Muhyiddin. According to Abdul Kadir Jasin, some members had pressed Mahathir hard to bring Bersatu out of PH. These included Mahathir's political secretary, Zahid Mat Arip, and others such as Mohd Rafiq Zaizamohideen, Redzuan Yusof and Wan Saiful Wan Jan.<sup>13</sup>

Third, the split in Bersatu exists not only among the leaders and MPs, but also at the state level. As a result of this split, four PH states have fallen to the now-ruling coalition: they

are Johor, Melaka, Perak and Kedah. The states of Johor and Kedah affected Bersatu more, because in those cases, the party lost the chief minister posts. There is speculation now that the Johor state government is in turmoil after Umno decided not to give in to Bersatu's demands for more seats in the state government after it sacrificed the top post. The matter was resolved for now after Muhyiddin intervened and met with Johor Umno and Bersatu leaders in Putrajaya.<sup>14</sup> The danger to Muhyiddin for not keeping his Bersatu faction happy in the state is that they may cross back to PH. PN only has two assemblymen more than PH and any crossovers from Bersatu may lead to a change of state government. The state government of Kedah is the last to fall to PN, after two PKR and four Bersatu assemblymen pledged support for PN.<sup>15</sup> Initially, Muhyiddin was eager to reach out to Mahathir by not toppling Mukhriz's (the son of Mahathir) government in Kedah. The Prime Minister apologized to Mahathir in his first address as the country's leader if he had hurt him, and even offered to meet. Mahathir declined the goodwill gesture. The move to topple the Kedah government came after Mahathir handed a request to table a motion of no confidence against Muhyiddin's leadership on the 18 May parliament sitting.

### **“COALITION(S)” WITHIN THE RULING COALITION**

The current split in Bersatu should not be seen as an internal party problem but as intra-elite factionalism in the Malay political community. Bersatu was formed in September 2016 as a result of splits within Umno during the Najib Razak premiership. Then-Umno deputy president Muhyiddin Yassin was removed from his position for being overly critical of the prime minister over the 1MDB issue. The other leader axed from Umno was vice-president Shafie Apdal, who later founded the Sabah-based party Warisan. Mahathir, Malaysia's prime minister (1981-2003), the longest-serving Umno president, and Umno member 001 (he was the first member of New Umno, formed after the original party was deregistered in 1988), also quit the party. Mahathir, Muhyiddin and Mukhriz later formed Bersatu.

Muhyiddin's faction of Bersatu entering into cooperation with Umno and PAS—under the banner of PN (Perikatan Nasional)—seems natural since all three are Malay-Muslim based parties. The bigger question is why the need to have two separate parties Bersatu and Umno in the same coalition, when in GE 14, they were fighting for the same seats. The bigger dilemma for the Muhyiddin faction is that it accepted former PKR members, including Azmin Ali and Zuraidah Kamaruddin who had left PKR after disagreements with Anwar Ibrahim. PKR have been fighting Umno since the 1998 *Reformasi* movement. It is doubtful if Umno grassroots can accept them. For Muhyiddin's Bersatu plus Azmin's PKR to remain a standalone is not tenable since it is relatively smaller compared to Umno and PAS.

To be sure, Mahathir's faction is even smaller than Muhyiddin's, and this camp would have preferred to remain in the PH coalition. It is now in limbo after the PH parties DAP, Amanah and PKR decided to name Anwar Ibrahim the leader of opposition instead of Mahathir. For now, PH remains the most solid block with the three parties weeding disloyal members. On the flipside, it is difficult for PH to win an election without Mahathir in the coalition. Already, many Malays regard PH as DAP-dominated. This was demonstrated by the rejection of the Malays in five by-elections held in 2019. PH's need for Mahathir is evident when Anwar later issued a joint statement with Mahathir that they are willing to work together to topple the Muhyiddin government.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it is unlikely that PH can sustain the support of Sarawak and Sabah-based parties without a figure like Mahathir leading it.

Sarawak parties are averse to working with the DAP as it sees the Chinese-dominant party as a rival. In fact, Mahathir's faction in Bersatu can still make a comeback if it can garner support from East Malaysia-based parties, and from those in Umno and PAS who wish to join him and whom he considers not corrupt.

The other challenge for PH is how it can regain enough public trust after its two years in power. Reforms may not be in line with what some see to be the needs of society, who feel that while institutional reforms are important, the government needs to put food on the table. The current PN government has been able to mobilize support from the Malay-Muslim ground and had been able to mix identity issues such as race and religion with bread and butter issues. One of the biggest mistakes of the PH government was its inability to quickly resolve socio-economic problems in the country even though this is in its plans. Its commitment to tackle institutional reforms have been seen as slow and at times too idealistic.

On the surface, the pact between Umno and PAS seems solid, albeit that the Muafakat Nasional is a collaboration between the country's two largest Malay-Muslim-based parties who had been rivals for decades. After GE14, this cooperation has led to numerous by-election victories, as it rode on Malay-Muslim voters' unhappiness. Its biggest victory was in the Tanjong Piai by-election when it won by more than 15 000 majority votes, three times the winning margin gained by PH in 2018.

Nonetheless, there are signs that not all is smooth sailing within this pact, with tensions stemming more from intra-Umno factionalism than from inter-party rivalry between Umno and PAS. Some Umno MPs have already expressed unhappiness for not being appointed into the Muhyiddin Cabinet. According to former deputy defence minister and senator Liew Chin Tong from the DAP, there are four competing factions in Umno: that led by Najib, by Ahmad Zahid, by Hishamuddin Hussein and by a loose group led by Mohamad Hassan and Khairy Jamaluddin.<sup>17</sup> To illustrate further, Umno President Ahmad Zahid and PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang were excluded from the cabinet. Muhyiddin named four senior ministers instead of a deputy prime minister but indicated that the most senior of the four senior ministers is Azmin Ali, and not an Umno or PAS MP. This call is surprising since Umno and PAS together make up the biggest bloc in PN, while Azmin is a new member in Bersatu, joining only after the Sheraton move.

## **CONCLUSION**

Bersatu is now at a crossroads. For starters, it is one of the smallest parties in the country and a new kid on the block. Its formation is due to splits from Umno. Its past successes were due to it being led by Mahathir and by senior politicians formerly from Umno. The current split in its ranks has put the future of the party in doubt. There are two possible options that it may take, although both unlikely to make it a dominant player. First, the party will remain split in two with each faction integrated into the PH and into the MN plus BN coalitions. This means that there is a possibility that the party will be dissolved with some, likely the Muhyiddin faction, rejoining Umno. This will happen only if Umno and PAS decide to cease cooperation with Bersatu in the election. The early signs are that this is likely to happen given that the Umno Supreme Council is still led by leaders from the previous BN government. The UMNO Supreme Council has already indicated unanimously that it will



not accept the current configuration of the PN coalition in the next elections and prefers to work closely with Malay-Muslim based parties. However, Umno president Ahmad Zahid later clarified that Umno is open to negotiating the future of PN.<sup>18</sup> But how such a coalition can win support from non-Malays remains unclear. Having an Umno splinter party rejoining Umno has its precedence. In 1988, Umno politician Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah formed Semangat 46 after a disagreement with Mahathir but brought the party back to Umno in 1996.

If Muhyiddin's Bersatu rejoins Umno, the Mahathir faction will be in a precarious position of being forced to join PH as a junior partner, with his Bersatu playing second fiddle in government if PH ever gets to power. Already, the current members of the PH coalition have welcomed the party to rejoin the opposition as long as several conditions are met. Mahathir's Bersatu is unlikely to join PKR, the party set up in the 1990s to oppose Mahathir.

Second, Mahathir can create a new coalition around himself, formed from his Bersatu faction, disgruntled Umno members not given the spoils of victory by Muhyiddin, Sarawak-based parties, and Sabah's Warisan. This means revisiting an earlier proposal he made to be prime minister of a unity government where members from different parties support him. On the surface, the number of MPs may not be enough for him to form such a government; too much depends on how many Umno members are ready to defect, and whether PH will support him. Another external factor that could change dynamics within Umno is the ongoing trial involving Najib Razak, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, and Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, which can create a crisis from within triggering more crossovers. In the same vein, Muhyiddin too can form a new party in order to solve this stalemate. This coalition can be built around him, Azmin and Hishamuddin.<sup>19</sup>

As for Bersatu, the future of the party may end up in courts if any of the factions choose to seek legal recourse. Initially, observers expected the showdown will be in the next general assembly which will be held this year. Mahathir's candidacy for chairmanship is uncontested, and Muhyiddin will face Mukhriz for the presidency. However, with the removal of Mahathir, Mukhriz and their faction from the party, and conversely their claim that the termination is illegal, the party may be drawn into a long legal battle instead.<sup>20</sup>

On the political front, the Muhyiddin government is unstable. While Muhyiddin has the advantage of being the Prime Minister of the country, his majority support from the current members of parliament is slim. It is true that many are also tired of PH's internal politicking, and for them, the protection of Malay rights, religion, and bread and butter issues are important. Even so, Mahathir is seen as someone who stood by his principles to prevent a backdoor government and who acted against corruption, kleptocracy, and abuses of power.

The tensions between Bersatu and Umno signify intra-elite competition of Umno warlords which began during Najib Razak's premiership. The situation is complicated now given that both Bersatu and Umno are also internally split, with a strong possibility of these groups coming together to form new alliances around old warlords.

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<sup>1</sup>Pejabat Pengerusi Bersatu, *Perletakan Jawatan Sebagai Pengerusi BERSATU*, Media Statement, 24 February 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The decision squashed accusations that some PKR leaders had urged Mahathir to step down or name a clear succession timeline. Some Bersatu members, unhappy with the calls for Mahathir to step down, wanted the party to leave PH.

<sup>3</sup> Ex-M'sian PMO officer reveals behind-the-scenes events that led to Dr M's resignation, collapse of PH govt," *Today*, 2 March 2020. <https://www.todayonline.com/world/ex-pmo-officer-breaks-down-events-led-dr-ms-resignation-collapse-ph-govt>.

<sup>4</sup> Datuk Wira Marzuki Yahya, *YAB Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad Sebagai Pengerusi Bersatu*, Media Statement, 27 February 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Some quarters in Umno and PAS were calling for fresh elections, while others including Mahathir himself thought that a special parliamentary seating would be able to resolve the problem through a vote on who the next Prime Minister should be. The matter went to the Malaysian King and names were submitted whom the King then interviewed one at a time. A political stalemate occurred where it appeared that Mahathir did not command a majority. This was after PH decided to name Anwar Ibrahim the Prime Minister candidate.

<sup>6</sup> CNA, "Mahathir says he wants to lead a non-partisan government," <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-interim-pm-mahathir-seeks-unity-government-12472126> (26 February 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Soo Wern Jun, "Dr M: Marzuki's termination as Bersatu sec-gen is invalid," *Malay Mail*, 20 March 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Kenyataan Bersama Pakatan Harapan, Bersatu dan Warisan, *Parlimen Perlu Bersidang Penuh*, 4 May 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Radzi Jidin, *Kenyataan Media Ketua Penerangan Bersatu*, Media Statement, 7 May 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Datuk Wira Marzuki Yahya, Setiausaha Agung Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), Media Statement, 7 May 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Radzi Jidin, "Ketua Penerangan Bersatu," Media Statement, 9 May 2020

<sup>12</sup> Sira Habibu and Zakiah Koya, "A party divided: Bersatu supreme council meeting to take place without Dr M, Mukhriz," *The Star*, 10 May 2020.

<sup>13</sup> FMT reporters, "As if 'possessed by the devil', Kadir launches stinging attack on Muhyiddin bloc," *FreeMalaysia Today*, 4 March 2020.

<sup>14</sup> *The Sunday Times*, "PM Muhyiddin brokers peace between Umno, Bersatu in Johor," 10 May 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Norshahril Saat, "Mukhriz Mahathir's downfall in Kedah: Winners and losers," ISEAS Commentary, 18 May 2020, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/mukhriz-mahathirs-downfall-in-kedah-winners-and-losers/>.

<sup>16</sup> Hazlin Hassan, "Mahathir, Anwar team up again to return PH to power," *Sunday Times*, 10 May 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Liew Chin Tong, "A New Party in the making?" 28 April 2020, <https://www.liewchintong.com/2020/04/28/a-new-party-in-the-making/>.

<sup>18</sup> Umno Online, "Masa Depan Perikatan Nasional: UMNO tidak pernah Tutup pintu rundingan," 11 May 2020, <https://umno-online.my/2020/05/11/masa-depan-perikatan-nasional-umno-tidak-pernah-tutup-pintu-rundingan/>.

<sup>19</sup> Liew Chin Tong, "A New Party in the making?" 28 April 2020, <https://www.liewchintong.com/2020/04/28/a-new-party-in-the-making/>.

<sup>20</sup> R Loheswar, "Dr Mahathir's lawyer warns of legal action if sacking by Bersatu upheld," *Malay Mail*, 29 May 2020 <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/05/29/dr-mahathirs-lawyer-warns-of-legal-action-if-sacking-by-bersatu-upheld/1870537>.

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