

Choosing a nonagenarian former PM to head Malaysia's opposition is a regressive move

By Sholto Byrnes



Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad applauds after he was elected as the opposition's prime ministerial candidate on Sunday / AFP

The announcement last weekend that Malaysia's opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), had chosen Dr Mahathir Mohamad as its candidate for prime minister made international headlines for two reasons. Firstly, Dr Mahathir has been the country's head of government before, for a record-breaking 22 years from 1981 to 2003, during which (and afterwards) his governing style was described as "authoritarian". With trademark sarcasm, the good doctor now one-ups that by conceding that in office he was nothing less than a "dictator". He is not renowned as an advocate for reformist democracy, which is what PH claims to stand for.

Secondly, he is now 92, which would make him the world's oldest leader if elected. Opposition columnists have ludicrously compared Malaysia, much praised by the World Bank, the IMF and other international bodies for its current government's reforms, prudent economic stewardship and excellent growth, with Zimbabwe. In fact, it is the latter's former president Robert Mugabe, a 93-year-old gerontocrat deposed ignominiously last year, who was so close to Dr Mahathir that the BBC's John Simpson once paid him the backhanded compliment of calling him "a kind of successful, Asian Robert Mugabe."

Malaysia's opposition is now effectively helmed by two leaders from 20 years ago: Dr Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim, the deputy he sacked in 1998 and humiliated after the latter was charged and then jailed for sodomy and corruption. Anwar is currently in prison on a second sodomy charge. His wife, Wan Azizah, is nominally PH's candidate for deputy prime minister but should the opposition win, its plan is for Anwar to be given a royal pardon, enter parliament via a by-election and then take over from his former nemesis as prime minister.

The notion that this represents change, let alone fresh blood, is laughable and reflects very poorly on the opposition's confidence not only in its younger cadres (and by younger, that means 50 and 60-year-olds) but also in those who have always opposed the Barisan Nasional (BN) governing coalition, which has never lost power since independence.

Theirs has not been an easy road. Many were imprisoned by Dr Mahathir for no good reason other than that their vehement opposition inconvenienced him. They are entitled to feel bitter at having to kowtow to their former jailer. And while Dr Mahathir might still be very sharp – his tongue has lost

none of its spikiness – they cannot be oblivious to the fact that proposing a man who could be 93 by the time he became prime minister again opens the country to international ridicule. (Any who doubt that should imagine the incredulous laughter if either George HW Bush, currently aged 93, or Valery Giscard d'Estaing, a sprightly 91, were to seek to return to the presidencies of the US and France, respectively.)

So why has Malaysia's opposition proposed him as their leader? Ah, but Dr Mahathir has changed his tune, some will say and has even recently apologised. Firstly, he said sorry for nothing specific and secondly, he then suggested it was Malay custom to apologise for possible past mistakes. However, whatever charges might be laid against him over possible wrongdoing during the course of his premiership – and opposition activists have in the past called for him to be put on trial for them – he is essentially unrepentant.

The late Karpal Singh, the formidable Indian national chairman of the mainly Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP), would never have stood for it. His daughter and others with a long record in the opposition cannot stomach Dr Mahathir at the top and have said so vocally, as have some significant members of Anwar's People's Justice Party (PKR).

No wonder, for this is no alliance of principle. It is one of convenience. And if the current prime minister, Najib Tun Razak, had been prepared to act as Dr Mahathir's tame supplicant and do everything his former boss wanted, this would never have happened. For ever since he stood down from the premiership, Dr Mahathir has not been able to let go. First he undermined his handpicked successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and then Mr Najib – not for any malfeasance on their parts but for the crimes of not taking his “advice” as orders and for not indulging his dynastic ambitions.

Paradoxically, Dr Mahathir's appearance at the head of the opposition pact is actually a testament to how strong a position Mr Najib has built over the last two and a half years. Recognising that it was Chinese faces who had the track record and the visibility in the opposition after Anwar's jailing, PH is now trying to hide them behind a facade of Malay politicians to win the crucial votes of the majority Malays.

But their new alliance is incoherent, with politicians having entirely contradictory records on matters of civil liberties and free speech, for instance – and, worse, deceitful ones, claiming that the goods and services tax that the current government has introduced could be removed, with no real plans for how they would replace the vital revenue.

There are decent people in the opposition, whom I have come to know personally. But this new top ticket drives a coach-and-horses through the opposition's old principles and thus through whatever moral authority they had.

Malaysia has a good government that has won accolades for its determined fight against violent extremism and its successful economic transformation programme. It deserves a better opposition. And there's a certain 92-year-old who deserves the gratitude of his people for services past – but also a retirement he has put off for far too long.

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