

## Could an opposition coalition work here?

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Dr Mahathir Mohamad's opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan, ousted the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition in the Malaysian general election in May.

Inspired by the shock win, seven opposition parties in Singapore met last month to discuss a coalition, to be led by former People's Action Party (PAP) MP and presidential candidate Tan Cheng Bock to contest the next general election.

Can such a coalition succeed here?

### It's different in Singapore

Analysts cautioned against comparing the political situations in the two countries.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said Malaysia has a history of strong opposition coalitions.

She said: "One key difference is Mahathir himself, given his standing in the Malay community and his contacts on the ground - that tipped the balance."

Unlike the allegations of widespread corruption in Malaysia, Singapore does not have that one desperate issue to rally the people, she added.

"We have to think whether someone such as Dr Tan has the same game-changing pull of Mahathir. And what is the manifesto he will use to rally people together?"

### What about the WP?

Addressing the Workers' Party's (WP) absence, the main opposition force here, analysts felt that while WP has considerable clout, having it in the coalition might not necessarily work.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan, said: "Without the WP, the alliance is not any weaker, as long as it does not try to enter WP's turf."

Associate Professor Tan said that while WP would add heft, credibility and goodwill as well as extend the reach and resources of the alliance, the question remains whether the other parties are willing to play second fiddle to the WP.

Dr Felix Tan, associate lecturer at SIM Global Education, said WP may see joining the coalition as a bad move.

"It risks diluting its own interests should it participate," he said.

Other analysts agree that WP stands to gain little from joining the coalition, which, being new, has little to offer in return.

### Been there, done that

Associate Professor Bilveer Singh, from the National University of Singapore's Department of Political Science, said if the coalition becomes credible, the PAP will be pressured to do better.

He said: "No matter who wins, having competition means both parties will be challenged to do better. The public will benefit from these checks and balances."

Analysts doubt the coalition can get enough traction to effect change in the next election.

Dr Felix Tan said: "The opposition has come together before in previous elections without success. It could be the opposition itself that needs tweaking."

### **Who should be leader?**

Despite being offered the leadership, Dr Tan has yet to give a conclusive yes.

Dr Singh said that as a highly respected ex-MP who lost the 2011 Presidential Election by a thin margin, Dr Tan is seen as an opposition asset.

But two analysts noted that at almost 78, his age could be an issue.

Dr Felix Tan feels that even if Dr Tan were to take the reins, "he is just one individual and is unlikely to make a big impact".

Dr Tan had also mentioned some opposition members might have to stand down for the good of the country.

This could prove a thorny issue, said the analysts.

Dr Singh said: "We have got egocentric and idiosyncratic leaders in the opposition.

"I think when Dr Tan said some people should move behind the scenes, it is for two reasons - credibility problems and individuals who are not capable in the face of certain issues."

The success of the coalition could depend on the unity of these leaders, and if some of them are a liability, it would be a lose-lose situation, he added.