

Rumours aimed at 'killing' foes

SUN 13



Rival groups in Umno threaten to disrupt party unity even as Mahathir pushes for consolidation

By **Zainal Epi**
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

KUALA LUMPUR: Rival groups in Umno have, in recent months, been spreading **rumours** to discredit their political enemies, even as **their** president Datuk Seri **Dr Mahathir** Mohamad turns his attention to rejuvenating the country's dominant political party.

Unwittingly these factions have been feeding the opposition with potent ammunition that is proving very useful for PAS, which has made some inroads by attracting young professionals. It is this **ammunition** that the prime minister has set about to defuse.

A key element in **Mahathir's** strategic campaign is the recruitment of fresh faces into the party command, to cut off the power struggle among the established groups which are **intent** on seeing their "political enemies" **fall** in favour of someone younger, if not, their own candidates.

In their current fractious mood, the intra-party cliques have forgotten the threat posed by PAS, a situation which Mahathir wants to take by the horns, going by his announcement yesterday that he will concentrate on party affairs. Some Umno members are fixated instead on "questioning the credibility" of leaders whom they feel have been too long in their positions.

A **sign** of the troubled waters in Umno appeared this week when a local Malay daily splashed the picture of **Pahang** Menteri **Besar** Datuk

Adnan Yaakob on its front page, with the news that he is expected to relinquish his post.

Speculation of this nature is not easy to brush aside, particularly because much of what appeared before have turned out to be true.

Take for **example** former Malacca Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Thamby **Chik**. **Rumours** of a scandal that were played up **by** a **daily** turned out **to become** the most severe test the senior Umno leader was to face.

Former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhd Taib faced a similar fate when he was **rumoured** to be the next to be axed, and the news was also played up by a daily

But in the case of **Adnan**, hardly had the day passed, before Mahathir announced his appointment as **Pahang** Umno chairman, a position **Adnan** held before the **Umno** general assembly last June.

Adnan took over from Information Minister Tan Sri **Khalil** Yaakob, who said that he had wanted to relinquish the post since last month but **only** had the chance to do so now.

Mahathir's **announcement**, made after he chaired last Monday's meeting of the Umno Supreme Council, came as a surprise to **rumour** mongers in the rival factions of the party at state level.

Mahathir said **Adnan** was appointed to the post "to give him more credibility" - a statement read by observers as a move to give **Adnan** full power over political, economic and administrative matters in the state.

The **rumours** of **Adnan's** exit as menteri besar **appar-**

ently began after he changed some policies pertaining to the state's economic direction after a closed-door meeting between corporate figures in **Pahang** and the state government.

Insiders said **Adnan's** handling of several state economic projects did not go down well with certain leaders in the state.

They said **Adnan's** approach has led to "some erosion of power - political and economic - for **certain** leaders in the state", causing a head-on confrontation between the factions.

One insider said: "**Adnan** was disillusioned with the performance of several subsidiaries of the State **Economic** Development Corporation (SEDC), which were not only 'doing' badly but wiping out even the paid-up capital.

"It is absurd to see even a second board listed company recording losses."

Some state party leaders said that **Adnan** needed "full political power" to ride over the economic turmoil, not just administrative power.

"A menteri besar makes decisions on state matters, but there are certain matters which need a political decision and this, a menteri besar cannot do unless he holds the state party chief's position.

"**Adnan** was not effective when he was not the state Umno chief because state economic subsidiaries are, although economic in nature and outlook, highly political. The appointments of directors and certain decisions are based on **political** considerations.

"Decisions based on political grounds need to be made

in certain situations and **Adnan** just cannot do it if he is not the state chief too.

"**Adnan** fits the bill as a younger generation leader **because** he is still young, although he is above 40, and is also a graduate," said a **senior** Umno source.

While **Adnan's** appointment makes him **more** powerful, an insider said, he had to step on several toes along the way. He will have to deal with the reactions, he added.

Rumour mills from among the rival factions are working overtime, spreading news of a purported list of leaders **expected** to be axed for wrongs ranging from sex scandals to corruption.

The factions see this is the right time to create doubts about their enemies, since Mahathir wants to clean up the party and bring in leaders

who can contribute new ideas and new **approaches**.

As **party** insiders see it, Mahathir is on the lookout for young leaders who are clean in every aspect, who do not take political position as a vehicle to make money but instead to serve the **party**, the people and country.

When Azlina **Othman**, a 36-year old lawyer who is a vocal champion of women's **rights**, was appointed to the Supreme Council, Umno factions thought they could see what was on Mahathir's mind.

Their feelings were confirmed when the **prime** minister appointed a **young** dentist, Dr Mohamad **Khair Toyo**, as Menteri Besar of **Selangor**.

The resignation of Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar as menteri besar early last month - after **rumours** of a sex **scandal** were raised - was trumpeted as the first of a series of changes of state leaders.

At least two other mentrii besar and a chief minister have been mentioned as **purported** candidates for **removal**, say party sources.

Another name that has been in the air is that of Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar Tan Sri Isa **Samad**.

Word has been going around since the last **Umno** general assembly that he had fallen out of **favour**, say party sources.

In Isa's case, there is no poison-pen letter, no news or photograph on the Internet, no motions moved in branch or division **meetings**.

For his rivals it is enough that Isa has been the Menteri Besar for four terms. His recent reappointment to the post was not smooth, for the federal government had to step in.