

**Muhyiddin is angling for the top**  
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COMMENT Umno may not do the task of internal reform well, like cutting down on the practice of money politics, but say what you like, it does do internal dissension well.

Just look at how party deputy president Muhyiddin Yassin affects to swim in his leader, Najib Razak's, slipstream while writing his own personal agendas.

Muhyiddin's reaction to the call by the MCA for a boycott of Umno-owned paper Utusan Malaysia over the latter's proposition that Malays rally behind the '1Melayu, 1Bumi' policy is a good illustration of the point.

Muhyiddin rapped MCA across the knuckles for calling for the boycott on grounds that sounded vaguely like he believed in freedom of the press and then sidestepped the question of whether he supported or disagreed with Utusan's '1Melayu, 1Bumi' rallying cry.

It was the clearest demonstration in his now delicate, two-year-old, trapeze act wherein he shows tepid support for policy initiatives of his party's president while leaving himself enough wiggle room to hint he would chart a new course as skipper of the crew.

It is the manoeuvring of a deputy who is mulling a challenge for the top position: the controlled wriggling does not cause too big a ruckus in the party but it sports the unmistakable hallmarks of incipient mutiny.

One supposes there would be no prizes for discerning these signs of a revolt's incubation in the folds of seemingly minor nuances of policy. After all, Umno is a six-decade-old party that has weathered several chapters of internecine conflict.

Contestants long seasoned by the party's intramural feuds would be skilled at the game of playing fast and loose with the pros and cons of still-fluid issues, the better to lever them to expedient advantage later when opportunity for getting up the greasy pole avails.

**Once overlooked**

Muhyiddin, survivor of the fallout from the Mahathir versus Musa Hitam internal feud of the mid-1980s and the ructions between Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim of the late 1990s, is apparently putting to good use the experiential wisdom he gained from those episodes.

In both instances, he initially backed the loser, only to imperceptibly shift course and come out looking none the worse for the wear. In each case, it was a story of plucking survival from the jaws of defeat.

There was reason to believe that when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became prime minister in 2003, Muhyiddin had the better chance of being named his deputy but Mahathir's pressure on Abdullah forced the latter's reluctant selection of Najib for the position.

As things turned out, it was Muhyiddin's criticism of Abdullah's protracted timetable for departure from the Umno presidency that hastened Abdullah's exit from the post which comes with the premiership of the country.

That criticism was a calculated gamble by Muhyiddin. It paid off and now Muhyiddin is poised to take another gamble by challenging for the top post that will either result in his apotheosis or in his evisceration.

### **Sheer tenacity**

It is one of the ironies of his career that if he makes the move to challenge, he may get the support of the very man - Mahathir - who was supposed to have stalled him before.

If that support materialises, it would be one of the more vivid demonstrations of how someone with an outsider's chance can re-insert himself into the reckoning given sheer tenacity.

Of course, the larger irony inherent in Muhyiddin's projected rise would be that an Umno bigwig from Johor is trying to reach the top on a platform that is strident rather than liberal.

From Onn Jaffar through to Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman through to Musa Hitam, contestants for top honours in Umno had attempted to travel on liberal wings rather than on rabid ones. Muhyiddin would represent a break in this pattern.

**TERENCE NETTO has been a journalist for close on four decades. He likes the occupation because it puts him in contact with the eminent without being under the necessity to admire them. It is the ideal occupation for a temperament that finds power fascinating and its exercise abhorrent.**

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