

Umno ratchets up pressure on Ku Li
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COMMENT Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's intriguing ride along the wispy divide between loyal dissent within Umno and insurgent dissidence has reached a decisive point.

Yesterday's manoeuvres by both him and the media aligned to Umno suggested that the Gua Musang MP's post-tsunami straddle of the divide is increasingly tenuous.

The Umno blogs have been touting that the Umno veteran is on the verge of quitting the party. Yesterday a mainstream TV channel, on its prime-time news bulletin, speculated that Razaleigh's resignation was imminent.

At the same time, Razaleigh, alongside another BN component party dissident, MCA's Ong Tee Keat, vented at a press conference their discontent with what both termed as the curtailed space for dissent within BN.

No less than Umno deputy president Muhyiddin Yassin rose to the bait by denying that his party has foreclosed on internal dissent.

Alluding to Umno's annual general meeting later this month, the party No 2, ostensibly in response to Razaleigh's implication that he would not be given a chance to hold forth at the assembly, said that speakers at the AGM are selected by their own states through democratic process.

In other words, if Razaleigh is not given a chance to speak at Umno's annual conclave, it is by democratic choice and not by exclusionary and discriminatory dint.

Ku Li intends to stay

That explanation coupled with the prattle in the Umno blogs about Razaleigh's expected resignation and the highlighting of its imminence by a TV channel on prime-time news indicate that the top hierarchy in Umno are going to drop him as their candidate for Gua Musang, a seat long regarded as not only an Umno stronghold in an otherwise PAS-dominant state but also as the Kelantanese prince's personal bailiwick.

In short, the Umno top brass has decided it doesn't want the messy business of dropping Razaleigh as their choice for the seat; it prefers him to leave, even if he would then stand as an independent candidate, which he is sure to if he is dropped.

In the event, PAS is expected to oblige Razaleigh by not contesting the seat to make it a two-cornered fight between the Umno and independent Razaleigh.

But Ku Li is not only refusing to play along - he reaffirmed to a close aide over lunch yesterday that he is not quitting Umno - he is holding fast to his unspoken yet widely bruited about strategy.

This is predicated on the hypothesis that Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim will be jailed in Sodomy II.

Razaleigh will then be the focal point for a rallying of forces from within Pakatan Rakyat and of Umno-BN dissidents as the compromise candidate to lead the country out of political stalemate, presumably while Anwar sorts out his problems.

This hypothesis is hedged by several contingencies.

If Anwar is found guilty on the basis of the evidence adduced thus far in Sodomy II, there is the possibility

that the reaction in the courtroom of public opinion would be sufficiently adverse for the results of the 13th GE, on the peninsula at least, to reflect a majority for Pakatan Rakyat enough for them not to want to resort to Razaleigh as an alternative.

Also, the speculation that Razaleigh can rally Umno-BN dissidents to his banner is thin because of the insufficiency of their number in the coalition's ranks.

Waiting game seen as futile

In any case, their current small numbers would be further reduced by the almost certain decision by Prime Minister Najib Razak and Muhyiddin to drop them from the Umno-BN slate for GE 13.

Furthermore, perhaps at an earlier stage of the evolving post-March 2008 tsunami, Razaleigh was viewed by some Pakatan types as an interim leader should Anwar be stymied by his legal trammels, but not any longer.

Increasingly, within Pakatan - even as attempts by Umno flunkies to embroil Anwar in sexual shenanigans, videotaped or otherwise - failed in their aim of destroying him, the former DPM has grown to be leader-inevitable more than leader-necessary, to bring the now 13-year-long agitation for the democratic restoration of the country to its culmination.

From that standpoint, Razaleigh's waiting game is seen as futile, even a tad presumptuous.

Umno's pre-election charade of getting him to quit the party rather than being forced to drop him is viewed as cover against him as post-GE 13 rallying point.

The party will go all out to see him defeated as MP of Gua Musang, the better to forestall the Razaleigh-as-focal-point scenario in the polls' aftermath.

In sum, the Razaleigh straddle - Malaysian politics' most intriguing glissade in the last three years - has entered a decisive phase because the Umno top brass has finally decided to call time on it.

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