

**PM-sultan talks: Johor MB's succession on agenda**  
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COMMENT Speculation has swirled over a scheduled 'four-eyed' meeting between Prime Minister Najib Razak and the Sultan of Johor at the latter's palace in the state capital today.

Najib flies in for the 15th anniversary of the waterfront Danga Bay development which stretches for several hectares along city's coast facing the Straits of Johor.

The celebrations get under way at 3.30pm, after which the PM repairs to the state palace for the meeting with the sultan that is expected to start at 5.30pm.

Because the sultan will also grace the anniversary celebrations - he is scheduled to launch a charity foundation in connection with the project - his meeting later with the PM has triggered speculation, more so when the next item on the PM's schedule is the Chingay parade in the town centre that only starts at 8.30pm.

Unsurprisingly, speculative eyebrows arched over the length and probable agenda of the scheduled palaver at the palace, with most theories apt to discount the possibility that the propriety of the charities that would benefit from the Danga developers' benevolence or the disposition of the deities that would be on show at the Chingay parade would take up too much conversation time between the bluebloods.

In short, the tete-a-tete between PM and sultan is expected to revolve on issues of political rather than social import. Like whether four-term Menteri Besar Ghani Othman would still be retained as Johor menteri besar after the upcoming elections.

The PM wants Ghani to stay but the latter is undecided and an allusion he made in a public address at the recent Thaipusam celebrations in Johor fed speculation that the incumbent wants out and knows who should take his place.

Men aligned to Muhyiddin

Ghani said out loud that Johor Baru MP Shahrir Samad ought to be promoted in the state Umno hierarchy on account of his integrity and ability.

This was read as indicative of Ghani's desire to withdraw in favour of Shahrir as Johor MB, though this would be an elevation that would be contested by at least three young aspirants aligned to Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

Muhyiddin, a former Johor MB, would be glad to see Ghani go but not replaced by Shahrir, who though he is not really an ally of Ghani's, is like the latter in being averse to the Umno No 2.

In the complicated calculus of Johor Umno alignments, any aspirant to Ghani's position other than Shahrir must be allied to Muhyiddin to have any chance of obtaining the position.

The sultan's dispositions on the matter are crucial to the ultimate choice; he is said to be in favour of a change of MB.

Historically, in Johor the choice of MB is a matter of delicate importance, with Putrajaya averse to commending a choice the palace might frown on.

This time the question is further complicated by the looming contest for the No 1 post in Umno between

Najib and Muhyiddin in party polls that would have to be held after the general election is over.

Singapore's view matters

As if the future MB-ship of Johor were not fraught enough, the other matter that is likely to be discussed is considerably more delicate, public discussion of which could raise suspicion that the discussants have contravened laws.

The matter came up in recondite fashion when Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong mused over a round of golf with his Malaysian counterpart during a recent visit that his government has discovered that MB Ghani is, after all, not hostile to Singapore's investment interests.

Ghani, overall, has been known to be frosty in his attitude to Singapore but Lee held that that perception no longer held up.

Like many matters Malaysian, first impressions don't necessarily congeal into lasting stereotypes.

It is not known if Lee alluded to other adversaries that are now viewed as hostile to the investing labours of Temasek Holdings, his government's investment arm that is heavily into Johor's prized flagship, Iskandar Development Region.

Perhaps, Najib wants to consult with the sultan on a matter that has the potential to sour ties with the state's blue-chip investors.

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