

Ku Li's PM quest gets its last airing

MalaysiaKini.com

June 14, 2013

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COMMENT If there is anything sadder in life than unrequited love, it must be unfulfilled ambition.

Almost three decades ago, the flavour of that truth was hinted at by the subtitle of a biography of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, 'An Unending Quest'.

That subtitle and what it entails are evoked by the news that the 10-term MP, the longest such occupancy by a federal legislator in Malaysian parliamentary history, who was returned from his southern Kelantan bailiwick of Gua Musang with a larger majority in the May 5 polls, has begun meeting with assorted MPs of the 13th Parliament.

tengku razaleigh speech 110310 02The latter are said to be unhappy with the putative contestants for prime ministerial power in the country's presently unstable political scenario.

These contenders are Najib Abdul Razak, who has said he expects to be challenged for the post of Umno president with its undisputed claim to the PM-ship of the country; Muhyiddin Yassin, who is apparently timorous about his prospects of unseating Najib; and Anwar Ibrahim, who is stalled by the fact that the rousing crowds which attended his pre-polls rallies did not proportionately translate into actual Pakatan Rakyat seats in the House, a point that's up for contention in the courts.

In other words, the situation is the best yet for a final shy at the prime ministerial wicket by the person who, for the better part of the past three decades, has been trying to be PM only to fail at each attempt by a peculiar combination of aristocratic hauteur and scruple.

When in April 1981, then-prime minister Hussein Onn, having decided to retire, called aside Umno senior vice-president Razaleigh to advise him to opt for the deputy presidency of the party instead of the top post because Hussein wanted his deputy Dr Mahathir Mohamad to succeed him, the more popular Kelantanese prince's sense of amour-propre led him to abide by the elder politician's wishes.

Out of deference to the retiree, Razaleigh went for the deputy president's post, to which he was surprisingly beaten, as much by the savvy style of challenger Musa

Hitam as by revulsion at the hauteur of a Razaleigh campaign that showed little or no understanding of the Malay distaste for overweening presumption.

A beaten Razaleigh sulked for three years before vying once more for the deputy president's post in 1984, losing yet again to Musa by the same margin of 200-plus votes, a result that showed that the strong support Razaleigh long enjoyed in Umno had not waned despite the man's attenuation from the top two posts of the party, regarded as his not just by logical progression up the party hierarchy, but by something that is more aptly rendered by the term 'manifest destiny'.

Rivals teamed up

In 1987, internal ructions in Umno saw Musa teaming up with ex-foe Razaleigh to take on Mahathir and Ghafar Baba for the No 1 and 2 posts respectively, with Razaleigh and Musa losing in a vote the losers suspected was tainted with fraud in much the same way that Pakatan suspects the vote in several seats in Election 2013 was marred by cheating.

A court case ensued with the verdict eventuating in the creation of an Umno splinter, Semangat 46, led by Razaleigh, of course.

This party led the Gagasan Rakyat opposition coalition which drew DAP and PAS into a tripartite force that fought BN in Election 1990, the first time since the 1969 polls that Umno-BN were menaced with the possibility of a loss of its two-thirds parliamentary majority.

But a devious Mahathir-inspired counter-thrust turned the Parti Bersatu Sabah's eleventh-hour bolting of the BN stable and tying up with Gagasan, into a potentially sinister Christian plot against the Muslims of the peninsula.

NONE Sufficient numbers of the latter were rendered anxious enough to rescind a nascent inclination to support Gagasan which stuttered to defeat at the 1990 polls after having surged on popular discontent with the authoritarian ways of Mahathir.

A Gagasan-led denial of BN's two-thirds parliamentary majority in the 1990 polls would in all probability have triggered the defection of more parties from the BN stable to the Gagasan camp, and Razaleigh's prime ministerial ambitions would have waxed on that wave.

But quirks of fate and dwindling stamina saw Semangat 46 fold as a threat and return to the Umno fold in 1996, a retreat that, had it been delayed by two years, would possibly have seen Razaleigh installed in the prime ministerial office by the

1999 general election when widespread anger at Mahathir's treatment of Anwar Ibrahim caused fragmentation in the Malay vote, the first time since the 1969 polls when Malays in large numbers decided that Umno was not their party of choice.

Razaleigh, as a lukewarm Umno member and MP, kept his counsel during the years of Malay-voter disaffection (1999-2008) with Umno over the mistreatment of Anwar which saw the latter goaled for up to six years on trumped-up corruption and sodomy charges.

NONEWhen a jail-freed Anwar led the opposition to a denial of the BN's two-thirds majority at the March 2008 polls, Anwar approached Razaleigh the following month with an offer that Razaleigh be PM for a term, provided the latter could bring across the aisle 10 Umno MPs allied to him which Anwar would transmute, aided by defections from BN MPs from Sabah and Sarawak, into a new government-forming parliamentary majority that would call for fresh polls.

Razaleigh wanted 30 seats for which he would choose the candidates at the fresh polls; Anwar, opting for deputy PM for a term under Razaleigh, would only offer him 10.

The deal fell through and Razaleigh chose to continue to bide his time in Umno, keeping his PM-ambitions smoldering on a low flame while mulling the pros and cons of a still-fluid political situation wherein Umno's loss of its long hegemony over Malaysian politics ramified across the national landscape.

The final thrust

Election 2013 confirmed that the loss was not a fluke. This has introduced uncertainty into national politics and has given fresh impetus to a final thrust for the PM's post by a septuagenarian politician who has long felt that it is his manifest destiny to become PM of Malaysia.

Hence the recent meeting between Razaleigh and 12 BN MPs from Sarawak and Sabah amidst a renewed flurry of speculation that Razaleigh is to become either the Charles de Gaulle of Malaysian politics or be confirmed as its Rab Butler.

The former was renowned as the imperturbable man of destiny who retreated into the wilderness after leading the Free French forces into Paris in 1944 upon the retreat of the occupying Nazi power but was not immediately called upon to lead the bedraggled French people to the greatness he had always envisioned for them.

The wilderness became one of the more romantic stretches in political history when

De Gaulle retreated to it only to return with triumphant vindication in 1958 to lead France.

Rab Butler was an estimable Conservative Party leader who twice missed out - in 1956, after Anthony Eden quit over the Suez debacle, and in 1964, after Harold Macmillan resigned - on becoming the PM of Britain although he was qualified by service and experience to take the post.

At a ripe 76 years, will it be the manifest destiny of a De Gaulle for Razaleigh Hamzah or will it be a Butler-an denouement to the career of a man to whom an unfulfilled quest must be as repugnant as a flight to the safety of sanctuary must have been for Muammar Gaddafi in the days of dictator's doom in Libya circa 2011?

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