

Gloves are off in Mahathir-Najib fight

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COMMENT Is this a case of desperation on the part of former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad after his not-so-subtle attacks failed to gain traction in Umno?

Unlike Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, where numerous Umno leaders and others in BN came out to attack the then prime minister following his dismal performance in the 2008 general election, the situation is different now.

Despite a litany of scandalous allegations and having performed even worse than Abdullah, Najib Razak appears to have the continual support of most of the Umno warlords. No one is breaking ranks so far.

As for the BN component parties, those who stand in line to replace Najib are far from appealing with the likes of Muhyiddin Yassin and Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

Obviously, they prefer the aristocratic son of the second prime minister at the helm instead of a leader perceived to be an ultra-Malay.

Speculations have been rife since last year that ties between Mahathir and Najib have soured dramatically and a blueprint was drawn to oust the latter.

Since then, the former premier has taken potshots at Najib, questioning the opaque transactions involving 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) and a number of his policies. On numerous occasions, he has hinted that Najib should step down.

However, Najib seems to have shored up his flanks, placating Umno grassroots leaders by ordering the auditor-general to validate 1MDB's accounts and vowing to take action if wrongdoings are detected.

Though detractors called this an eyewash, those in Umno appeared to be satisfied with the prime minister's action.

Perhaps Umno is not so keen on another bitter power struggle and having to start from scratch, especially when the political and economic situation in the nation is both volatile and unpredictable.

Though Mahathir claimed yesterday that Najib had lost the support of all races, including the Malays, it cannot be denied that Umno bagged 88 parliament seats in the last polls under Najib's stewardship, up from 79 in the previous one.

But of course, the hardliners have claimed credit for the upswing in Umno support - that this was primarily due to their sowing of fear among the Malay community when Najib was wasting his time wooing the non-Malays.

Hitting Najib where it hurts most

In this context, plunging the party into another crisis could erode the confidence of Malay voters and that could spell doom.

Meanwhile, under siege, Najib has thrown away his transformation cap in favour of a sterner approach.

Flexing his muscles, his administration has condoned the wanton use of the Sedition Act to crack down on dissenting voices, hence proving to Umno hardliners that he can wield a stick when the carrots fail.

But for Mahathir, this couldn't be a better time for a change in leadership. The next general election is a few years away. The once formidable opposition is now in tatters. The hudud bill threatens to rip apart the opposition bloc. The opposition leader is languishing in jail.

Concerned that the soldiers in Umno are refusing to march to his clarion call and as a result of this, his dream of seeing his son rise up the ladder could be frustrated, Mahathir has now taken the fight to the next level. All gloves are off.

He hits Najib where it hurts most and casts aspersion on the prime minister's denial of any involvement in the grisly murder of Mongolian woman Altantuya Saariibuu in which two of his bodyguards were sentenced to death.

The murder is Najib's Achilles' heel. While there is little so far to prove the PM's direct involvement in the murder, there is however evidence that Najib has abused his powers in his bid to put a lid on the controversy.

Ask Deepak Jaikishan - the man who helped the late private investigator P Balasubramaniam to alter his statutory declaration and flee the country.

As expected, in broaching the matter, the former premier has sent shockwaves. Only time will tell whether the Umno chieftains will remain solidly behind Najib.