

Is Najib holding Mukhriz hostage?

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ANALYSIS After weeks of enduring vitriolic attacks from former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, it now appears that the empire has struck back.

In the latest turn in the saga that has seen Mahathir incessantly attacking Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, the PM appears to have gunned straight for the Mahathir's Achilles heel - his son Mukhriz.

A hint of the counterattack was revealed in the largely anti-climactic interview with TV3 last Thursday, where Najib claimed that Mahathir is unhappy that he (Najib) did not revive the Johor crooked bridge project scrapped by the fifth prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The interview also saw Najib exercising control over the mainstream media, to neutralise Mahathir's cyber attack through the blogosphere and online portals.

Before and after the interview was aired, several Umno leaders came forward to throw their full support to the top man in their party - something that has now become a running theme in the mainstream dailies.

Even Muhyiddin Yassin, who was in Indonesia for an official visit, broke his elegant silence to voice solidarity with Najib.

After showing he has a grip on Umno, Najib's empire officially struck back by dropping the bomb on Mukhriz, who is the menteri besar of Kedah.

Bukit Lada assemblyperson Ahmad Lebai Sudin drew the first blood. He urged Mukhriz to declare his support for the Umno president, or quit.

Najib's cousin and party veep Hishammuddin Hussein took the second stab, saying Mukhriz would fail as menteri besar if Kedah Umno splits.

A father vs boss dilemma

This put Mukhriz between a rock and a hard place: father and boss, who should he choose?

If Mukhriz joins his father's crusade, it will not only mean breaking ranks with his colleagues, but his post as menteri besar of Kedah may also be at risk, making him the first casualty of this war.

When Ahmad Lebai urged Mukhriz to declare his loyalty to Najib, he explicitly pointed out Mukhriz's dilemma: Najib picked him to be the menteri besar.

Lest we forget, Khairuddin Abu Hassan (right), who shot into the limelight with his police report against 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB), was sacked as Batu Kawan Umno division vice-chairperson.

Even if Mukhriz manages to survive, with all other Umno big guns aligned to Najib, how will he continue to climb the power ladder in Umno?

Mukhriz missed the golden chance of becoming an Umno vice-president in the last party elections - with a narrow nine-vote margin loss to Hishammuddin.

What if son betrays father?

What if Mukhriz succumbs to party pressure and declares he will be loyal to Najib? This, indeed, would put his father in an extremely awkward situation.

Mahathir had, albeit in a veiled manner, decried threats made against those who do not voice support for Najib. But if Mukhriz, too, turns his back, Mahathir will be as alone in his mission as he fears.

If Mahathir ceases fire now, does it mean the octogenarian also ceases to have influence in and on Umno?

It is worthy to note at this point that when Mahathir resigned from Umno in an effort to edge out Abdullah in 2008, Mukhriz did not follow suit. Instead, he stayed and saved his strength for the next battle.

Mahathir's track record shows that this longest-serving prime minister of Malaysia will not call a truce with Najib easily.

Whenever in an extremely disadvantaged situation, Mahathir has never hesitated to take drastic measures to tip the scale, often checkmating his opponents as a result.

This includes dismissing then deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, who was extremely popular in Umno, during the economic crisis in late 1990s, and later resigning from Umno in protest against Abdullah.

This time round, what could be the ace up the sleeve of this self-proclaimed lone ranger?