

Muhyiddin, are you our next prime minister?

MalaysiaKini.com

Apr 17, 2015

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Will Muhyiddin Yassin become the fifth or will he, against all odds, reach the summit to be the seventh prime minister of Malaysia?

The list of DPMs who could have been prime ministers but did not make it for various reasons is an impressive one - Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Musa Hitam, Abdul Ghafar Baba, and Anwar Ibrahim.

The ones who succeeded were Abdul Razak, Hussein Onn, Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and Mohd Najib Razak.

As the spat between Najib and Dr Mahathir Mohamad dominates the news nowadays, Muhyiddin seems to be saying very little. But surely he must be pondering his next move.

So what is Muhyiddin thinking right now? Is he ambitious enough to pursue the coveted prize of being a prime minister one day?

Plays it close

When I left journalism in 1998, Muhyiddin was the youth and sports minister under Mahathir's administration. At that time, it never crossed my mind that one day he will be the deputy premier. He was in the news a lot then but it was mostly because of the Commonwealth Games being hosted in Malaysia for the first time.

That is what is interesting about politics no matter where it is being played. Anything can happen.

If politics is a game of poker, Muhyiddin must have played his cards right. Of course, you need a lot of luck and with a good hand, you must know when to take the chances.

He looks the part too, smart with a Russell Crowe-like smile. That is why it is not easy to read Muhyiddin (right) because on most occasions he keeps his cards close to his chest.

After his stint as the youth and sports minister, Muhyiddin held several portfolios both under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Najib, namely domestic trade and consumers affairs, agriculture, international trade and industry, and now education. You may have heard what people say about the high probability of education ministers becoming prime ministers.

Why did I use the phrase "against all odds" for Muhyiddin? It is because the ride has not been smooth for him. The former menteri besar of Johor has tasted several defeats in his political career.

In 1984, he contested for an Umno supreme council seat but lost. In 1990, he contested the party's elite post of vice-president and lost again. The man did not give up. He went for the same vice-president's post in 1993. This time he won, only to lose it again in 1996 defending it.

An unlikely challenge

Since then, however, his star has been rising and he never looked back. The sacking of Anwar in 1998 which changed the landscape of Malaysian politics must have played its part too.

For Muhyiddin to become the prime minister, the first criteria is for him to be the Umno president, or at least, a caretaker president.

The Umno election is expected to be held next year as the three-year mandate given to Najib and the others will end then. Will Muhyiddin go for the president's post?

I can think of a contest only if Najib decides not to run. It is unlikely Muhyiddin will challenge Najib.

Going after Najib's post would be politically suicidal for Muhyiddin. Umno presidents are rarely challenged and no incumbent president has ever lost in the history of the party.

There were challenges against Tunku Abdul Rahman and Hussein Onn but they hardly saw any fight. Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah came close to beating Mahathir in 1987 but it was not enough. Mahathir won by razor thin 43 votes.

So, Muhyiddin taking Najib on for the president's post is a definite no-no. Why should he? There is no real crisis or split in Umno now. Yes, the country is split right down the middle between BN and Pakatan supporters but not Umno.

Since the Mahathir-Tengku Razaleigh confrontation in 1987, Umno has been having a major crisis every 10 years or so. The Mahathir-Anwar saga came in 1998 and the Mahathir-Pak Lah feud after the 2008 general elections.

A tough choice

If the 10-year cycle can be used as an indicator, the next possible tussle (in theory at least) will happen in or around 2018. It is a plausible prediction because the next general election is expected to be held in 2018.

One of the few disadvantages Muhyiddin has is the age factor. Muhyiddin is six years older than Najib. Voters would expect a younger leader to take over.

However, Muhyiddin will be 71 in 2018. That is not too old an age to lead a country. Probably he would even be at the peak of his political career then.

Two other scenarios where Muhyiddin will not be the next prime minister will be if he himself resigns, or Pakatan takes over from BN in the next general election. Exciting times ahead, surely.

Since Umno elections are expected to be held only in 2016, should Muhyiddin speak up and make a stronger stand on pressing issues, most importantly on the current disagreements between Najib and Mahathir?

Should he be more blunt in revealing to whom he owes his allegiance? He was certainly stronger with his views when Mahathir was attacking Pak Lah not very long ago (in 2008).

But between Mahathir and Najib, it is a tough choice. Muhyiddin worked under Mahathir who made him a menteri besar and gave him his first cabinet post. Now he is Najib's deputy; they have been together in the cabinet since the 1990s. For Muhyiddin, it's like choosing between his mentor and his current boss.

But that is what politics is all about. Having difficult choices and making tough and yet unpopular decisions. If Muhyiddin becomes a prime minister one fine day, he will be encountering problems more serious in nature, with tougher decisions to make. Please ask Najib, Pak Lah and Mahathir. They will tell.

Please stand up

Besides being stronger with his words, Muhyiddin should also make amends for some of the things he has said. No apologies demanded here but he should refrain from making pronouncements like he is "Malay first" rather than "Malaysian first". It does not augur well with the '1Malaysia' concept being promoted by Najib.

Sir, you are always a Malay. Your father of proud Buginese descent and your mother a Javanese. People of rich culture and traditions. Above all, however, we are all Malaysians first. Malaysia is made up of Malaysians of many ethnic groupings scattered from Kangar to Sandakan.

True Malaysians will never say they are Chinese first, Indian first, Iban first, or Kadazan first.

Coming to the end of this article, there are several questions to ask.

Is Muhyiddin prime minister material? It is a very subjective question. I suppose each and every citizen of this country has an opinion on that whether you are an eligible voter or not, whether you are a BN or a Pakatan supporter.

Do you, Muhyiddin, aspire to or dream of becoming the prime minister? All I can say is that there is nothing wrong with having dreams. Dreams can come true. Martin Luther King once had a dream and Barrack Obama did one better by becoming the first black president

of the US.

Are you, Muhyiddin, the next prime minister of Malaysia? I hope your answer is 'yes'. After all, you are now the deputy premier. That makes you the natural and only choice to take over the baton from Najib.

But before that, people want to hear you speak up and make a stronger stand. That is the real Muhyiddin.

So to borrow the lyrics from rapper Eminem's song "The Real Slim Shady", I would like to ask: "So won't the real Muhyiddin please stand up, please stand up, please stand up?"

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