

Najib takes off the gloves

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COMMENT After months of parrying broadsides aimed at him by Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak yesterday came out counterpunching at his tormenter-in-chief.

It was a clear sign of the PM's desperation at finding the ground shift from under his feet, requiring a switch from defence to offence in the battle to stay alive politically.

Weeks of carefully choreographed support from Umno divisions, BN components and cabinet ministers is beginning to fray at the edges and even at the centre, what with top-tier Umno leaders starting to voice misgivings about the shenanigans in 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) and its cascade of ill-effects on other bodies, amid public unease over the Goods and Services Tax (GST).

Former finance minister and Najib critic Daim Zainuddin's (photo) surmise that the array of support for Najib is more form than substance is turning out to be prescient.

Pegged against the ropes, Najib has had to come out fighting, an uncharacteristic reaction given the tenor of his leadership that has inverted the manual on the art - that it is possible to lead from the rear than from the front.

Najib chose Sabah as the venue for the delivery of a direct counterattack not only because Sabah Umno and the state's BN, despite the quavers of a few, have been steadfast in support of him throughout his current travails, but also because the state has been a bugbear to Mahathir during his 22 years as PM.

Sabah's unwieldiness continued to dog Mahathir long after he left prime ministerial office in 2003.

The festering problem of 'illegals' in the state had escalated to warrant the setting up of a royal commission (RCI) whose inquiry traced blurry lines of responsibility for the problem up to the federal Home Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

Mahathir was the occupant of both offices when the problem began to metastasise in the 1990s.

Its eventual report, whose release was delayed, did not finger Mahathir directly and chose to gloss the issue of who was responsible in an attempt to avoid blame-fixing.

Mahathir had denied all responsibility for creating the Sabah 'illegals' problem, but his disavowal has been less plausible than, say, Anwar Ibrahim's denial that he is a sodomite.

Ironically, the latter sits languishing in jail for the commission of a sexual crime while the former, susceptible to a charge even more grave in the moral calculus of wrongs, plots to cut the ground from under the feet of a second PM to have sauntered into his cross-hairs.

A 'Waterloo' for Mahathir?

That Sabah has been a 'Waterloo' of sorts for Mahathir has been true since the late 1980s when Chief Minister Joseph Pairin Kitingan was recalcitrant to Mahathir's behests, and extending to the mid-1990s when a stampede of support from the state's Umno divisions for Anwar's quest of the deputy presidency rattled Mahathir into retreating from an initial endorsement of incumbent Ghafar Baba.

Also, in yesterday's campaign swing through Sabah, Najib chose to bring up a crucial chapter in Umno's history - its internal elections of 1987 - and used it to inveigh against Mahathir's alleged ingratitude.

A few weeks ago, Mahathir got the gratitude stakes going by reminding Najib that he had written a letter to his predecessor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, urging him to choose Najib as his deputy when Abdullah dithered over a choice he had wanted an Umno elective assembly to make rather than make it himself.

Mahathir forced Abdullah's hand in January 2004; this was to prove costly to Abdullah because the disregarded contender, Muhyiddin Yassin, helped end Abdullah's Mahathir-pressured retirement in early 2009.

Now it is the turn of Najib to remind Mahathir of what he did for him in the crucial 1987 Umno polls: an eleventh-hour switch of support by Najib to Mahathir in that election saw the incumbent ghost past challenger Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah to retain the party presidency by a whisker.

Both Mahathir and Najib are now simply saying to each other, "I'm owed big time."

Mahathir's debt to Najib is the weightier because his then six-year premiership received a 16-year extension; it could have been unceremoniously ended in April 1987.

By contrast, Najib still stood a good chance of being deputy prime minister even without Mahathir's letter of support - his chances of beating Muhyiddin in a contest for the deputy presidency were better than even - if Abdullah were allowed to leave the choice, as he preferred, to Umno's elective assembly of 2004.

Najib chose to side with Mahathir in 1987 not from principle but out of naked self-interest: a vacating Anwar handed deputy Najib the Umno Youth presidency on a silver platter in return for Najib's support for Mahathir.

In the 1987 Umno polls, Najib was ideologically closer to challenger Razaleigh's Team B than to incumbent Mahathir's Team A.

Trying to find 'principle' in the now periodic Umno wars of replacement and succession is akin to searching for a needle in a haystack.

The politics surrounding these wars confirm the truth of Ambrose Bierce's definition of politics: "The strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles."

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