

If DPM, Shafie axed, turmoil in Johor, Sabah

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By Adrian Wong

Political analysts have warned Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak against dropping his deputy Muhyiddin Yasin and Rural and Regional Development Minister Shafie Apdal from the cabinet as doing so will only deliver two key men to the camp of his political enemy, Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"If Najib sacked both Muhyiddin and Shafie, then he will create a real opposition for himself. The two will have no choice but to form an alliance with Mahathir," political analyst Khoo Kay Peng told Malaysiakini.

Naturally, the duo will be working with those who can consolidate their position, he said.

Thus, the most logical choice for them to turn to would be none other than Mahathir, who ruled the nation for 22 years and who also happens to be Najib's loudest critic, Khoo pointed out.

"Mahathir is probably the most influential retired politician in the country. He is even more influential than (former opposition leader) Anwar Ibrahim among the Malay electorate," he added.

This view is echoed by Merdeka Center director Ibrahim Suffian, who believes Mahathir will reap the benefit from the tussle.

"It would not be as drastic as 1998 (during Reformasi) but it could lead people to migrate to Mahathir's side and allow that faction to grow," he said.

However, he said no one in Umno currently has the capacity or the courage to create a decisive split in the party as Anwar, who was the deputy prime minister and Umno deputy president, did back in 1998.

Thus, the repercussion would not be on the same level as during the Reformasi period, he added.

Challenging the top

The Umno-linked New Straits Times reported that a cabinet reshuffle could take place after the Hari Raya celebration next month.

This comes hot on the heels of speculation that Najib might axe Muhyiddin and Shafie, both of whom have been critical of the 1MDB imbroglio.

If the trio - Mahathir, Muhyiddin and Shafie - joins forces, the 1987 Umno crisis will repeat

itself, this time with a different theme and a new set of players, Khoo said.

At the 1987 Umno election, Mahathir's presidency was challenged by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who was the candidate for Team B in the party.

At the height of that leadership crisis, the High Court ruled that Umno was illegal and the party split into two - Team A, which registered itself as Umno's successor, Umno Baru, while Team B created Semangat 46 (Spirit of 46).

"During the A-B team era, both were fighting for position and control," Khoo said, "whereas this time, it is to save the party and coalition."

Crucial states for Umno

This would echo Mahathir's prediction that Umno and BN will lose if Najib continue his leadership, he added.

However, until and unless either Muhyiddin or Shafie calls for Najib's resignation or leads the opposition against Najib, the above scenario is not likely to happen, he stressed.

In addition, given Muhyiddin's seniority and strong support among the party grassroots, Khoo believes Najib is unlikely to sack his number two.

Meanwhile, sidelining Shafie (photo), the Umno vice-president from Sabah, will also put Najib at risk of losing support from the East Malaysian state.

"Both Johor and Sabah are crucial states for Umno," said Khoo. This may bring trouble to Umno as the two states form the bulk of its support.

"Najib also needs Sabah's and Sarawak's support because of Peninsular instability. Umno lost a lot of seats as well as the popular vote in the Peninsular."

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