

Khairy's new battleground: Umno itself
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To the man on the street, it would appear that Khairy Jamaluddin Abu Bakar's descent in influence is just as fast as his ascent during the era of the fifth Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

It is easy to see why. Just less than five years ago, name-calling on blogs spread like wildfire. His detractors were calling him the de facto PM, a stand-in for his father-in-law or a "fourth floor boy" during Pak Lah's five-year reign.

NONEAnd after the 2008 general election tsunami and Abdullah's resignation which quickly followed after that, it would appear that Khairy's luck took a 180-degree turn.

A far cry from his smooth sail into the Youth wing's number two post, which he was appointed to, he had to fight tooth and nail for the Umno Youth presidency in the 2008 party elections, battling through a vote-buying controversy.

Khairy's early months as Umno Youth chief were not easy neither, with rumours every other week that certain parties in his Youth exco lineup were planning a coup, even more so with his reformist agenda.

What is a fact was that during those first few months, the programmes and retreats organised by him or his camp only saw the support of no more than half of the movement.

In the third part of his interview with Malaysiakini, Khairy admits that although, to this day, he may not have 100 percent of the Umno Youth behind him, he is still rolling with the punches.

Does Khairy feel alone?

"No. If I felt alone, I would be much more despondent than I am today.

"I am, above all, a realist in politics. I don't have lofty expectations nor ambitions. So when I look at a problem and changing Umno Youth as a 'problem', I need to look at it and how I can solve it. But not how I can change the facade or the angle of the problem.

"Like when I make statements, they don't understand. They ask me how come I'm quick to speak out against Malays who allegedly make racial statements. They ask 'how come you're more of a BN Youth leader than an Umno Youth leader'," he said.

NONEBut it's a good thing, according to the 34-year-old first term MP for Rembau. According to him, this would be a learning process for his 700,000-strong movement.

"I need to persevere and show that this is what I believe in so they can slowly come to understand it. They have to ask themselves 'why is he doing this?', instead of coming to a conclusion and saying that I'm not a true-blue defender of the Malays.

"If I force it down their throat, they'll reject it. I want them to think about whether it's the right thing to do and the politically right thing as well, if not we'll lose in the next general election," he said.

But he has high hopes for his members and thinks that they're slowly warming up to his leadership, as well as broadening their views.

The recent BN Youth Lab townhall meeting was one such example when division leaders previously thought to be "opposed to his camp" turned up, and watched the PM put in the hot seat by young Malaysians who asked him questions ranging from the Internal Security Act to racial issues.

"It opened up their minds on what young Malaysians feel on certain issues," he said.

At the same time, he did not dismiss the possibility that he may end up being a one-term Youth chief after revealing that he has not made up his mind about recontesting at the next party elections.

But in the same way, Khairy drew parallels with Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak on trying to find a balance in broadening their appeal to non-Malays but retaining their hold among the hardcore party grassroots.

'Najib and I are seen to be flying solo'

When asked about what Umno's biggest challenge will be for the next general election, he said that it is about showing the people that they have changed.

NONE"I think people like the direction in which Najib (right) taking the country, generally. But I feel that if he does what he has set out to do, or half of it, it'll be a tremendous achievement in view of his circumstances at the moment.

"The biggest criticism from middle class urban voters, people who are educated and the opinion makers, is that (Najib) is at times flying solo. And because of that 'we can't trust you guys because the leader is doing something good, but does he have the buy-in of everybody?'

"Maybe it's the same situation that I have in Umno Youth," he said.

The last mile

Despite the seeming Khairy-Najib similarities, it is still bewildering and a topic of great speculation when the prime minister left Khairy out in the last cabinet "reshuffle" in June.

During the interview, Khairy was initially reluctant to address the question the first time around. One can only assume that he has been asked every other week on what he thought of the cabinet line-up, whether in public or private.

But after the second round of questioning, he relented, though he may have betrayed a hint of frustration.

NONE"I try to make the best of my circumstances. When you work from the outside, it's easier in a sense because you're freer in being able to express and to champion an idea, like the BN Youth lab, because you're unencumbered by government position.

"But it is in government within the walls of bureaucracy, where the decisions are made. I suppose from the outside looking in, I don't know what happens there nor do I have a say.

"But I guess it's a matter of trust, 'I've done this for you, now I'm handing it to you and I hope you can do the best with it'," he said.

However, he said that there are still many ways from idea to policy when it comes to the landscape of Malaysian politics.

"We have to remember that the Umno supreme council has strong input in the cabinet, and so does the BN supreme council. And the Umno political bureau has a strong say in Umno, all of which I am a part of.

"Although I'm not there at the last mile, but I am there at the first 25 miles of the marathon. And for that last mile, I will have to trust the other people to take it there," he said.

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