

The March 8 poll-tergeist
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Prior to the March 8 general election, Malaysiakini
MCPX

unraveled a plot hatched by some diehard Barisan Nasional supporters to rescue the ruling coalition from self-destruction.

The supporters also wanted to jolt Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi from his slumber.

bn barisan nasional election 2008 manifestoThey were worried that the arrogance of the BN government and its leaders would banish the coalition into political oblivion.

When repeated appeals and warnings fell on deaf ears, they had resolved to vote for the opposition to signal their protest and force the coalition to do some soul-searching.

But what they had not expected was a Tsunami to strike.

The wave was so strong that it washed away the coalition's treasured two-third majority in Parliament and sent four additional states tumbling into the hands of the bewildered opposition.

The battle begins

Even the grand wizard Dr Mahathir Mohamad did not foresee this and in the immediate aftermath made a chilling suggestion to his successor to emulate the Japanese and disembowel himself in shame. Or resign. Whichever suited him best.

Since March 8, Mahathir who until then looked destined to be inducted into the Hall of Past Leaders had found a new zeal for his post-retirement fetish - dethrone Abdullah.

lingam tape inquiry day 4 170108 mahathirThe former premier is highly-skilled in this arena, having disposed of many political careers in the past. With each passing day, his army grows in size and its clarion calls louder and bolder.

The March 8 nightmare also brought an end to Abdullah's pre-retirement fetish of catching a few winks here and there.

With eyes wide open, the premier is now determined to keep his hold on the kingdom and is even prepared to do battle with the old guards baying for his blood.

Somewhere in between the two armies, Najib Abdul Razak is deliberating his future while speculations abound as to why he is not going for the jugular to seize the throne.

In this war of epic proportions, Umno is being drained of its strength.

Umno blamed

Smiling from the sidelines is Anwar Ibrahim, the one political career which Mahathir and his cohorts just cannot obliterate. Exactly a decade after his unceremonious exit from power,

the maverick politician is back in the race for the coveted top post. Providence or dumb luck? Either way, it must taste sweet.

anwar ibrahim vk lingam hearing pc 290108 absurd Then again, Anwar was under the tutelage of the best in the trade - Mahathir himself.

His so-called meetings with BN MPs purportedly waiting to switch camps and the proclamation that he could be prime minister soon have left many twitching in their seats with discomfort.

This is also very unsettling for Mahathir.

He dreads the possibility - which since March 8 has become very real - of his former estranged deputy moving into his old office and mansion in the administrative capital.

To make matters worse for Umno, the party is also being blamed by its coalition partners whose presidents had deftly avoided assuming responsibility for the electoral debacle.

umno 2007 pemuda keris 061107 raised They accused it of haughtiness and insensitivity as exemplified in many incidents, the most notable being the brandishing of the keris. While those responsible defended the act as ceremonial, the 'others' saw it as a stab in the heart of racial harmony and equality.

The overzealous Umnonites might have contributed immensely to the swing in votes but leaders of the component parties with their arrogance, slavish mentality and long list of scandals were also responsible for alienating their respective communities.

As for Abdullah, the murmurs of discontent towards his leadership had been making the rounds for a long time. Among others, he had been accused of lacking grit.

In the final analysis, Abdullah, said critics, is not made up of the right stuff to lead a coalition replete with predators waiting to pounce with their razor-sharp fangs and claws.

His son-in-law exacerbated the situation with his big ambitions and little patience. Now the two are paying the price.

Inherited rot

However, Mahathir cannot absolve himself from all that had happened. He too played a pivotal role in what transpired on March 8.

The rot was inherited by Abdullah, it was not his making. If anything, Abdullah just stood by and watched things decompose further since assuming office in 2003.

The state of the judiciary, police, local councils as well as widespread racism and the host of other problems which plague the nation did not emerge overnight. They were cultivated over the decades.

If Abdullah had just continued with the system, there would have been little fuss or disappointment. But he chose to make grand pledges of reform and then failed to keep his word.

Some claimed that Abdullah had attempted to set the house in order but his plans met with

stiff resistance. So he just bowed to pressure and went with the flow at the behest of his confidantes.

While Mahathir had managed to manage the rot and keep the silent majority contented, Abdullah however was seen as being managed by the rot and the silent majority became discontented.

Under the old regime, there was one emperor and the rest his loyal subjects. In the new regime, there were many emperors while the real emperor snoozed or left the kingdom for engagements abroad.

The country, it seemed, was put on auto-pilot. The plane was hurtling towards a mountain and much to the horror of the passengers, the cockpit was vacant. So the passengers took control and steered it to hitherto uncharted territories.

hindraf british petition rally 251107 malaysian flagsThe Abdullah administration was also a public relations disaster. Its second-rate handling of the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) issue being a prime example.

Even in Umno, the dissatisfaction towards the president was on the rise. It reached the zenith when the leadership made last-minute changes to the choice of candidates. In protest, the disgruntled factions sabotaged the campaign as conceded by Abdullah himself.

Father of democracy

Abdullah had inadvertently become the country's Father of Democracy. It is under his tenure that Malaysians, especially the younger generation, experienced the power of the ballot box. It was a new dawn indeed.

abdullah ahmad badawi polling day vote 080308 05Malaysia's fifth prime minister had unleashed a poll-tergeist which would be difficult for his successors to exorcize.

The Tsunami even caught the opposition by surprise. They stormed into power simply because of the resentment people had for their rivals.

The voters had made up their minds long before the Election Commission announced the polling date. The candidate or the party did not matter. The order of the day was to tip the Scales.

The true victors were the people. And the message was loud and clear. Should the opposition fail to heed this, they too would suffer a similar fate in the next polls.

On that note, the Anwar factor cannot be dismissed. The fiery orator must be accorded due recognition for his profound impact on the election outcome.

Many would cringe at this, but he is still a relevant force. A strong Malay opposition leader was the missing ingredient in the Malaysian political landscape and the former deputy premier perfected the dish.

Never mind the fact that if he had not been sacked in 1998, this article would have been redundant and so would have been Abdullah.

But fate had decreed otherwise and Anwar once again proved his relevance but it is

Abdullah's future which now hangs in the balance.

The longer Abdullah clings on to power the stronger Anwar would become. Mahathir knows this, Anwar knows this, but Abdullah pretends not to know this.

What next?

Malaysiakini meets up with the same diehard BN supporters for another cup of coffee to get their casual take on the latest developments.

So will Abdullah survive?

There was prolonged silence, a concrete response could not be offered. "Don't know, perhaps, may be, only God knows," were the best they could muster.

"But one thing is for certain," they stressed, "Abdullah had surprised us with his courage to fight on, and we respect him for this."

"This is what we wanted to see in a leader ... strength, determination and will."

Although overdue, the supporters were nonetheless happy with the reforms initiated by the prime minister in the wake of the March 8 polls. Better late than never, they said.

"This is definitely a step in the right direction. BN must change its mindset and become more open and transparent if it wants to remain relevant. The change must be from top to bottom and include all the component parties," they added.

However, the supporters stressed that the reforms must not only be seen as happening on the front-pages of newspapers but be executed on the ground. It should not be a mere re-packaging exercise. Or it would just serve as additional fodder for the opposition.

umno 2007 khairy jamaluddin 061107 03One supporter also pointed out that it would be wise for Khairy Jamaluddin to distance himself politically from his father-in-law.

"He should put his ambitions on hold and return when the dust has settled. Otherwise, it would be difficult for the prime minister to consolidate his position," he said.

In all fairness, the supporters believe that it is still not too late for Abdullah to stamp his mark.

With generous doses of courage, he could leave a greater legacy than his predecessor by cleaning up the rot. No more 'Mr Nice Guy'.

But would Mahathir, Umno and BN allow Abdullah to do this? And what about Anwar? Would it be another case of being so close but yet so far?

The saga continues ...

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