

**'Najib does not owe me any favours'**  
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**exclusive** With key rival Mohd Ali Rustam now out of the Umno deputy presidency race, the coast is almost clear for Muhyiddin Yassin to claim the much-coveted post at the Umno polls next week.

Yesterday, president-to-be Najib Abdul Razak dropped broad hints that he would prefer Muhyiddin as his second-in-command.

At a Malaysian Institute for Integrity function, Najib (*right*) said he was more inclined to pick someone who displays “integrity and ability” instead of “loyalty”.

"If someone is loyal to the boss but does not have any integrity and ability, then the boss can fall because of him," he said.

That has sent a clear signal that Najib is rooting for International Trade and Industry Minister Muhyiddin as his No. 2.

Umno vice-president Mohd Ali, who was barred yesterday from contesting, had previously caused a stir when he said Muhyiddin could not be a good deputy because he has an eye on the party president's post in the near future.

The other contender, party information chief Muhammad Muhd Taib, who has claimed to have no ambition to become prime minister, has also warned against a strong deputy who could be a threat to the boss.

But party senior vice-president Muhyiddin stressed that he did not intend to do Najib a favour when he had called for outgoing Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to quit earlier than the 2010 deadline.

“I do not think it is because of something that I have done that Najib is where he is today. I don't think that is fair and I want to correct that,” he told *Malaysiakini* in an interview at his ministry office in Jalan Duta, Kuala Lumpur, last week.

“He doesn't owe me anything. I did it for the sake of the party, and for the sake of the country.”

He added that it was Abdullah and Najib who eventually sealed the deal on the power transfer, which was brought forward to this month to coincide with the Umno general assembly and elections.

“I voiced what I had to voice. I share the broad sentiments of the grassroots and at the end of the day, they (Najib and Abdullah) are the ones making the decision and I can't be involved in that, so nobody owes me anything. I don't think it's fair to say someone has to repay me for what I did.”

Muhyiddin conceded that his relationship with Abdullah has suffered since.

“(Our ties) have been good for a long while, but not as good now as one would imagine. For obvious reasons, he felt slighted.

“Of course, he felt disappointed when I spoke out in that manner but I think there is always a need for sacrifice. If you’re there to just say nice things so that the boss will be happy with you, I don’t think I’d be the doing the right thing.”

### **‘No collusion with Dr M’**

This concludes a two-part series from a 60-minute interview with Muhyiddin.

### **Malaysiakini: You pushed for an early transfer of power. Why were you willing to put your neck on the chopping block?**

**Muhyiddin:** I’m not too sure when I did that, I wasn’t thinking about my neck being on the chopping block. I said it because I think it was a very important issue that needed to be addressed - this question of leadership or the lack of it. Sorry to say, that involved the prime minister’s position.

I saw after the elections that the situation was not good. I feared that we would be sliding faster if there was no radical move to change the status quo. And I think this (the weakening of Umno) is continuing - there are studies (that) show that we are not gaining ground. I believed the first and foremost thing that had to be done was to address this issue (power transition), and I knew it was not easy.

I thought about the matter for many days before I came out with the plan. I started engaging Najib to talk about it and I asked him, ‘What do we do now? Are we just going to accept this fact or do we initiate something?’

I believed I had to do something and when I did, it was done wholeheartedly and with sincerity because the country needed a change, and of course, the party as well. So I spoke out.

### **Before you spoke out, you met with former PM Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Many made the assumption that there was collusion between you two.**

There was no collusion. It was not just about me and Mahathir, but many other people (who) shared this sort of sentiment. A lot of people wrote through their blogs about the situation so I was just expressing the broad sentiments of the grassroots.

I think it’s something that we had to do as a matter of national interest and we had to speak up. I know we have to face the (consequences) of speaking up. I did not do it out of disrespect towards the prime minister. I have always had high regard for him.

It was not done with ill intentions. It was done in the interest of everybody. It was done because it was something that we needed to do. I believe that when you (speak) the truth, it can be very painful, but at least the response was good.

**Your relations with PM Abdullah Ahmad Badawi have suffered as a result. Did you meet him and try to explain why you did what you did?**

I do acknowledge this. (Our ties) have been good for a long while, but not as good now as one would imagine. For obvious reasons, he felt slighted.

Of course, he felt disappointed when I spoke out in that manner but I think there is always a need for sacrifice. If you're there to just say nice things so that the boss would be happy with you, I don't think I'd be the doing the right thing.

So I have to bear the (consequences of) what I said. It (relationship with Abdullah, *left*) is not as amicable as some would imagine but I think it takes time (to heal). I think he understands, many people understand as well.

I always would want to establish good rapport with everybody, with the boss in particular. I have been good friends with him for a long time but I've got matters that I feel the need to (express).

**By speaking out for an early transition, you have helped a few people in Umno. Najib would feel that he owes you...**

I don't think it is proper to put it in such a manner as to say that he owes me because of what I did. I do not think that it's fair, and I do not seek repayment or reciprocity in terms of treatment.

While some people think along those lines, I think it is something of importance when I said there is a need for change. And I thought of who should be the likely person to take over the leadership, and for me, it's none other than the deputy president of Umno.

I do not think it is because of something that I have done that Najib is where he is today. I don't think that is fair and I want to correct that. He doesn't owe me anything. I did it for the sake of the party, and for the sake of the country.

Najib himself must have engaged with the prime minister on why there is a need to have a change in leadership to save the situation. Both of them have their own contributions, to make this thing (transition) possible. It's not just me.

I voiced what I had to voice. I share the broad sentiments of the grassroots and at the end of the day, they (Najib and Abdullah) are the ones making the decision and I can't be involved in that, so nobody owes me anything. I don't think it's fair to say someone has to repay me for what I did.

## **Umno is losing ground among Malays. How will you address that decline?**

When we talk about reforms, about the sort of changes that you have to go through, we need to talk about Umno first.

I spoke at length about the need for radical change - it has to be done, the sooner, the better. First, we need to look at the party itself. Second, we have to look at the members. We have some three million members, it's a big party so to make changes with that sort of size is not easy but you have to start somewhere.

I believe you have to start (with) the leaders and my idea is to reinstate the confidence of the Malays towards the party because the people are saying that Umno is not what it used to be, that it no longer fights for the Malay cause.

The perception issue is something that we need to address so my point is that we need to go back to the very basic core, which is to create a better understanding of what Umno fights for, not just for the Malays, but also for others - the need to be fair to other races and to fight not only for the cause of the Malays but for the rest of the country as well.

Then, of course, we need to create better understanding among the younger generation of Umno members, which has not been done for a number of years.

We lack courses and seminars so there is this lack of real understanding about what they are fighting for, so much so they start to be self-serving, they become greedy. They have no grasp of reality and this, coupled with some misrepresentation of being corrupt and arrogant, (has led to) that impression (sinking) into the minds of many Malaysians. So there is a need to correct that.

There is also a need to look into the organisation itself. How Umno has performed for many years shows there is a need to (keep up with) with changing times and changing expectations.

Structural reforms are needed within Umno. We talk about democracy, we must go back to the

very basics - elections in the party, no quota system that has created this so-called corrupt practices, money politics among members...

Of course, the role that Umno plays *vis-a-vis* the other BN parties, the impression among the component party leadership is that Umno is the big brother. Some say we are bullies, that we take them by the nose, which I think is not correct, but the impression seems to have some bearing on the minds of the component parties.

They want to be equal partners, they want to be seen as playing an equal role and while Umno is the bigger party, they want us to be more accommodating. So we don't have to just look at Umno *per se* but to look at the BN structure as a well.

I want to promote the idea of a new BN. Maybe after 30 years, we should have a new terminology, like 'National Alliance'. This is just an idea but it should be more than just the name, the content is also important.

In order to look into the content, you have to look into the various things, for example, the distribution of economic opportunities *vis-a-vis* other races, the New Economic Policy, issues of justice, religion and so on.

There are certain aspects of the (federal) constitution and policies that we have adopted in the government that might need, not to say rethinking, but revisiting.

In the context of younger Malaysians, they must be made to become relevant. We (Umno and BN) need to be relevant but we cannot do so without adapting to whatever is happening around (us).

### **These will be discussed at the upcoming BN convention...?**

Yes, I think they would want to revisit all this and we hope that we will have a lot more time than just a day or two for the convention. There can be pre-convention discussions about this new understanding that needs to be developed within BN parties.

Of course, there is the need to look again at some of those (ideas) that have been agreed on by the founding fathers of BN but need to be re-examined in the present situation (to) create shared responsibility in implementing economic well being, social well being, cultural aspects...

### **Umno is in a dilemma. It's going to be hard for Umno to retain Malay support and at the same time win back non-Malay support.**

It's not just Umno *per se*. Umno has its problems but so do the other component parties, so we need to create that new understanding.

Just take the example of economic issues. This lack of understanding of what the government is doing - that it only caters to some sections of the Malays and at the expense of the Chinese and Indians...

I think those things would have to be addressed and I think if we can tackle those problems, then there is hope for us to regain the confidence of the public.

**There are people who say that Umno will find it very hard to reform itself until and unless it loses power.**

Well, I do not want to think along those lines. I think there is still hope.

There are problems but there is still the possibility that we can address the situation. Of course, again as I said, it depends on what the leaders and the members do to deal with such a situation because if you don't change, the people will change you.

That is what I have been trying to say from the very beginning, to instill in them the fear - if you don't change and adjust to the demands of the new Malaysian thinking and mindset, then you'll be cast into oblivion.

I said it months ago, we don't want to be cast into the dustbin of history where the people forget us. But I don't think Umno only changes when it loses power.

**But what about Umno members?**

This is not a job for one person or just the president, but a job for everybody.

So there could be a massive exercise that goes right down to the branches to instill some discipline in them. You buck up or you lose power, you do something quick or you'll be forgotten, that sort of thing.

They did not realise how serious the situation is. But you have to ask if they really want to serve the country...their community and ...their race. People are now thinking differently, so what do you do about it? Do you want to hold on to power or do you want to lose power?

And I will tell them about the coming general election. Why? Because if you don't do it (change), then in two or three years that might be the end of us.

So, that sort of statement will put fear in them. You have to say that if you want to continue to be supported by the people, then you have to acknowledge the problem and what you need to do is to change quickly. This is the hardest part, the hardest task.

**What's your prognosis for the three upcoming by-elections?**

For Bukit Gantang - I was there to launch an event at Changkat Jering, which is under the Bukit Gantang constituency - my assessment is that there are other bigger issues which might sink into the minds of the voters - the Perak political situation.

And there is this also very racist approach - that in Perak, a Malay government has toppled a Chinese

government, and I don't think it's correct. So we have a big task here.

It takes time to explain the situation, I think the Malay voters are quite okay, only the Chinese and Indian (voters) who will feel sort of unhappy about the situation.

Whether the Malay voters come out in full force to give support to the BN candidate, that's something we're trying to work out. Of course, we're also trying to talk to the Chinese. We have them (MCA and Gerakan) go down and talk to the Chinese to explain the situation, that there bigger issues than the Perak issue, such as national issues. So there is a good chance of winning, but of course, hard work.

I'm not too sure about Bukit Selambau, it's a 50-50 situation.

In terms of Batang Ai, it very much a Sarawak matter. The issues that need to addressed in Sarawak are the NCR (native customary rights to land), the state leadership. But I do hope that these issues will be addressed by the Sarawak government and they traditionally have worked quite well there. Hopefully, we can retain the seat.

### **On the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) talks with the US, what exactly are the stumbling blocks?**

The contentious issues in the Malaysia-US FTA negotiations are the inclusion of government procurement and competition policy. The US want government procurement to be in the FTA...

The inclusion would limit our capabilities in implementing measures or policies towards achieving the NDP (National Development Policy) objectives. The chapter on competition policy proposed by the US has a broad definition which covers government policies related to government-linked companies.

We are willing to have a chapter which only covers basic principles and technical assistance or capacity-building elements. The US needs to be more flexible in its approach before both sides can reach any agreement on this issue.

The US also wants to link labour and environmental domestic laws and regulations with its dispute settlement policy, which is to say it wants us to observe all five core conventions in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) linked to dispute settlement provisions.

We cannot agree to this as we have yet to ratify the core ILO conventions on freedom of association, elimination of compulsory forced labour and elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

On the environment, US wants enforcement of environmental laws to be subjected to dispute settlement provisions proposed by them, whereas we can only agree to consultation and non-punitive provisions.

We also want a different approach to the liberalisation of the services sector. The US wants an

approach which calls for liberalisation of most sectors up-front, whereas we are prepared to adopt a progressive approach.

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