

No parting the dream team

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has been a target of the opposition parties who have been casting doubt on his relationship with the Prime Minister. But ties between the two top men remain solid.

The Star - 25/3/2007



INSIGHT
JOCELINE TAN

newsdesk@thestar.com.my

THE Prime Minister sportingly covered his ears with both hands last week when reporters asked whether he had found a bride.

He was clearly tickled for he was smiling broadly as he walked off rather too quickly after telling the press corps that it was "too late" to ask more questions because the press conference was over.

It was not the first time Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had been asked about talk regarding his remarriage. He had on an earlier occasion suggested that rumours about his marriage were, well, just rumours.

The same week in Pekan, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak was brushing off rumours of another kind - that there were problems with his boss, the Prime Minister.

Najib said his relationship with Abdullah was extremely close and there was no basis to stories that they had difficulties.

Relations between them or, for want of a better word, their "political marriage," was not on the rocks.

"Even a tidal wave will not shake us," he added.

It was not the first time Najib had touched on the PM-DPM relationship.

Najib often dwells on issues about party and politics when he is in his homestate and before an Umno grassroots audience.

He knows how susceptible the ground is to talk of rifts at the top. He realises his home base must always be well informed about issues especially when the issues concern him and the party.

"He is always telling them that his role is to support the Prime Minister in his programmes and policies," said his press aide Datuk Tengku Sharifuddin Tengku Ahmad.

Still, the opposition parties and political blogs have been full of innuendoes and claims that Najib has fallen out of favour with Abdullah, that he will be sidelined or even that he will be forced to challenge the No. 1 post.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Relations between the PM and DPM can be categorised in one word - excellent. It's the foundation and bedrock of the stability and strength of the party at the moment," said Umno Youth deputy chief Khairy Jamaluddin.

Khairy himself had a hellish year in 2006, a victim of rumour mongering, or as some of his friends put it, blog mongering. He has survived the experience, ignoring the allegations for much of the time and refuting them when he needed to.

He said that from where he stood in the Youth wing, he could see that the relationship between the two top men was based on trust and confidence, without either one hav-



Warm body language: The Prime Minister has shown immense generosity of spirit to his deputy from day one and there is a high comfort level between them.



Omar: 'The opposition cannot take on the general, so they go for the next main man'



Reezal: 'They are always in touch with each other even when one is abroad'

ing to second guess the other.

The Prime Minister, Khairy added, has shown the spirit of leadership in delegating key tasks to his deputy whereas Najib has proven, in words and action, the good deputy that he is.

"They are the dream team, the most important partnership in the country today. They reassure the younger generation like me of the country's political stability for the next few decades," he said.

And as a number of people have noted, Abdullah's trust in Najib could not be better demonstrated than in his asking Najib to chair Cabinet meetings when he has to travel out of the country.

"This is one PM who is very confident of his power. He sees himself as a manager and he is not afraid to delegate. Many are not aware that the PM and DPM are always in touch with each other, discussing and consulting, even when one of them is overseas," said Datuk Reezal Merican, political secretary to Abdullah as Finance Minister I.

A great deal of the speculation surrounding Najib also has to do with the intense public interest over the case of the murdered Mongolian woman and the fact that one of those charged is Razak Baginda, a political analyst close to Najib.

The opposition parties have exploited the issue no end at their *ceramah*, making some pretty outlandish allegations.

"The matter is now before the courts and it's good that the trial will take place sooner than later.



»They are the dream team, the most important partnership in the country today«

KHAIRY JAMALUDDIN,
UMNO YOUTH DEPUTY CHIEF

Razak Baginda should have his day in court, justice should take its course and the facts allowed to come out.

"You can't stop people from talking about something sensational but if people have to talk, it is better they talk about the facts of the case rather than on things plucked from thin air as what's happening now,"

said Omar Mustapha, a former Najib aide and now principal partner of the strategic consultancy firm Ethos & Co.

But conspiracy theories about Umno politics are unlikely to dissipate and there will always be an appetite even within Umno for alternative versions of news and events.

The reason is that the general understanding of ties between Umno's No. 1 and No. 2 is still largely based on the way Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad conducted his relationships with his four deputies during his 22 years in power.

"Succession was not a guaranteed thing under Dr Mahathir. So you can't blame Umno members for thinking that the No. 2 post is not a safe post. I keep telling people they have to change the way they see things in Umno because Pak Lah is not Dr Mahathir. Things are quite different now," said a political insider.

Given that, Abdullah deserves a great deal of credit for the positive working relationship.

Abdullah is naturally warm and trusting and it is this embracing personality of his that has largely defined their relationship.

His political style is not one of slash-and-burn and his path up the political apex has not been at the expense of others.

He has shown immense generosity of spirit to his deputy from day one, making no secret of his regard for Najib's late father Tun Razak Hussein who was a mentor figure to him.

He has even described himself as the political son of Razak.

"There is good chemistry between PM and DPM but Tun Razak is the common bond for them," said Deputy Information Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

The opposition is also unlikely to lay off Najib as a target in the months to come.

"They cannot take on the General, so they go for the next main man.

For as long as the No. 1 and No. 2 are on solid ground, opposition politicians like (Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim have no chance of making any sort of comeback. That's why they need to make up stories and create issues," said Omar.

Another current topic among the opposition is that Najib will get impatient in his position as No. 2.

"He is still young, he will wait. Besides, his political history is such that he has not toppled anyone to go up," said Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Samad.

Besides, Najib is not about to make the same impatient mistakes that Anwar committed.

Instead, he is likely to take a leaf from his own father who was a loyal and patient No. 2 to the first Prime Minister.

Said Ahmad Zahid: "I've been watching them. They are very comfortable with each other; you can see it in their body language. At the same time, Datuk Najib is always very proper towards the PM, he does not act or speak out of turn.

"Datuk Najib understands very well his place as the No. 2."