

Stage set for future line-up

Some thought it was a glimpse of the future hierarchy of Umno when they saw rising star Khairy Jamaluddin on the same stage as top guns Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein at an event dedicated to the late Tun Razak Hussein.

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INSIGHT
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It was one of those rather unique situations in politics. The event was a seminar on the Legacy of Tun Razak Hussein and the three men seated on the stage were directly or indirectly linked to the late Prime Minister.

There was his son Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, his nephew Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, and Khairy Jamaluddin, son-in-law of the Prime Minister who sees himself as Razak's political son.

"They looked so comfortable together. The body language was there," said Faisal Abdullah, deputy chief of Selangor Umno Youth.

Some of those looking on thought they were looking at the future leadership hierarchy of Umno, if not the country.

Najib, as the Deputy Prime Minister, is the anointed successor to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi whereas it is no secret that Umno Youth chief Hishammuddin will make a bid for the more exalted tier of Umno vice-president.

Then there is Khairy, the most watched and talked about young politician in the country today, and by most accounts, the next Umno Youth leader.

And if he does get to lead the Umno Youth wing, then, as Faisal suggested, "the sky's the limit".

But if there were those who saw the trio as some sort of future power triangle, there were also those who thought it too simplistic a notion.

Malay politics, they said, is too complicated for long-term predictions.

They pointed to two of the speakers at the seminar, royal politician Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and former deputy prime minister Tun Musa Hitam. Both men entered politics during the Tun Razak era and were two of the most fascinating politicians of their time. But they were shooting stars that did not reach their aspired destinations.

As such, the road ahead for Khairy, in particular, is still rather tenuous.

At the same time, he has come a long way. He has also gone through one of the longest political baptisms of fire in Umno history.

For the greater part of the last two years, he was the subject of smear campaigns and gossip, projected as the power behind the Prime Minister and painted as an ambitious upstart, and he had to endure some pretty outlandish speculation about his private life.

It all reached a climax last year in the run-up to the 2006 Umno general assembly when he made a number of controversial speeches, which non-Malays took exception to.

"I think he is on the upswing. Say what you like about Khairy, he has built up support in the Youth wing and he has turned the corner," said corporate strategist and former Najib aide Omar Mustapha.

According to Umno Youth secretary Datuk Rahman Dahlan, Khairy is one of the most hard-working politicians around.

"He has gone all over the country, meeting members, attending programmes and officiating at functions. He was so much on the move at one point, I felt sorry for his wife," he said.

Khairy is what Umno people call a "phenomenon." His impact has been likened to that of Datuk Azalina Othman Said and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim when they began their climb in Umno.



Good body language: Hishammuddin, Najib and Khairy on one stage. Honouring Tun Razak's legacy to the country's development cemented the ties between political son Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and biological son Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.



Omar: Khairy has turned the corner and is on the upswing

Juhaidi Yean Abdullah, press aide to Higher Education Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamad, was astonished by the reception Khairy received even in remote Jeli during a political programme a couple of months ago.

"The turnout of Umno Youth people, the media and the excitement, it was as though the PM was coming," said Juhaidi.

Khairy, it has been suggested, has also been on a charm campaign of sorts. They say he wants to patch up the dents to his image, and that he wants to bring out his better side.

For instance, he won all-round approval —



Faisal: Good body language among the three men

and turned heads — when he turned up for the joint MCA-Gerakan Chinese New Year do this year in a striking red Chinese jacket complete with white silk cuffs and frog buttons.

"I was afraid he would have a hard time there but people were posing with him for pictures," said Rahman.

Khairy clearly has his eye on the general election — he hopes to be picked as a candidate — and after that, the party election.

His central role in so successfully organising the Tun Razak seminar speaks volumes. Razak was an ideal subject of focus. For a

start, he has a special place in the hearts of Malays for his role as the architect of the New Economic Policy and policies like Felda.

Or, as Umno Youth exco member Datuk Subahan Kamal put it: "Tun Razak lit the spark for what we are today."

He is a worthy role model to all politicians, young or otherwise.

Secondly, Abdullah identifies with the vision of Razak and even sees himself as the political son.

Third, Razak is a timely alternative model to the overwhelming legacy of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, deemed somewhat politically incorrect since his fallout with his successor.

And finally, having Najib as the guest of honour is a signal that Khairy has no problems with the Deputy Prime Minister.

"It was a kind of coming together of the political forces at that level. By honouring Tun Razak, it was like cementing the ties between the political son and the biological son (Najib).

"More important, it sends a strong message to the ground that Khairy is with Datuk Najib, that he is committed to the Umno hierarchy, its history and traditions," said a well-connected media advisor.

It should also put to rest all those conspiracy theories that Khairy is in cahoots with Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to unsettle Najib.

Khairy has come out strongly for Najib in the past year.

During the Ijok by-election, he went all out to refute the accusations made against Najib over the Mongolian case.

At one *ceramah*, he declared with some emotion: "I, Khairy Jamaluddin, deputy Umno Youth chief and son-in-law of the Prime Minister, pledge my full support and stand firmly behind Datuk Seri Najib."

Said Rahman: "Khairy is only 31. His future lies with Datuk Najib. All of us know that."

It has been said that the post of Umno Youth chief is as good as Khairy's or, at the very least, he is ahead of everybody.

If he has a problem, then it is the fact that he has not been "tested," as they like to say in Umno. He won his deputy's post unopposed in 2004 after a couple of contenders backed out.

Neither did he have to fight to become Rembau Youth chief. He was appointed to the post in 2003 when 35 new divisions were created as a result of an increase in parliamentary seats.

"He has charisma and he is passionate about his politics but he may want to spend more time in the division," said Rembau Puteri Umno head Bibi Sharliza Mohd Khalid.

It is said that he is over-rated in many ways, yet deserving in other ways.

Juhaidi recalled how a friend of his was bowled over by Khairy the first time they met.

"He put my friend at ease within minutes and they had such an intelligent discussion that my friend's only complaint was the pop-yeh-yeh styled suit in some shiny material that Khairy wore," said Juhaidi.

But intellect and charm alone are no guarantee of victory in Umno politics and the power of envy cannot be underestimated.

Still, Khairy has a trump card like no other — he may not be the son of a former Prime Minister but he is the son-in-law of a sitting Prime Minister.

It explains why he looked like he truly belonged up on the stage with Najib and Hishammuddin during the Tun Razak seminar — all three have direct ties with a past or sitting Prime Minister.

Given that, can anyone be blamed for thinking that they were witnessing the future of Umno?