



INSIGHT
JOCELINE TAN

joceline@thestar.com.my

Lull before the storm

The Star - 18/5/2008

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has cleared one political hurdle after another following the general election but more turbulence may lie ahead for the Prime Minister.

THE Prime Minister crossed another important hurdle last week.

He managed to contain the potential defection of his MPs in Sabah to the Pakatan Rakyat. The threat remains but it is no longer on red alert.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has been negotiating an obstacle course of sorts since the recent general election. The hurdles ranged from calls for him to step down to the Menteri Besar issues in Terengganu and Perlis. Then there is Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad sniping from the side.

"He has been fighting bush fires on all fronts," said an aide to a minister.

And it is awkward, to say the least, going home to a Pakatan Rakyat-run state when he visits his Kepala Batas constituency.

The EGMs advocated by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah also seem to have fizzled out. To date, only four Umno divisions have gone ahead with the meetings.

"There is no point having the EGMs when all our branches and divisions will be meeting from July onwards. Whatever the issues or unhappiness, they can be raised at those meetings. They will reflect the real mood on the ground," said Labuan Umno chief Datuk Suhaili Abdul Rahman.

It would have been embarrassing for the Umno president if Tengku Razaleigh's effort had snowballed because it was a thinly veiled attempt at challenging his leadership.

But it is to the Kelantan royal politician's credit that he has gone through the party's constitutional channels and, in line with his upbringing, he has been both refined and restrained in his criticism.

Lukman Ghani, a long-time Razaleigh loyalist, claimed that division chiefs were afraid to hold the EGMs because of "interference and harassment."

"I know we are a small fly buzzing around the leadership but Tengku has always been consistent about Umno members exercising their rights to choose their leaders," said Lukman.

The truth is that Tengku Razaleigh, for all his charm and charisma, has passed his prime. At best, he can be a voice of conscience in Umno the way that Dr Mahathir, love or hate him, remains an imperative opinion-shaper in the country.

However, Abdullah has made genuine advances on several fronts.

His administration is seriously addressing cost of living issues and he has finally made a bold move to reform the judiciary and Anti-Corruption Agency. They are overdue but it is better late than never.

His initiatives for a more professional civil service and police force are ongoing and the journalistic fraternity is excited about talk of a less legislation-controlled media.

But can all these help him survive a full term?

Maybe yes, maybe no, but if these reforms go through, Abdullah may well go down in history as some sort of Malaysian Gorbachev, an ambivalent hero appreciated for his reforms but also blamed for eroding the old system.



On the ground: Abdullah has been explicit about defending his post as Umno president and he will have little trouble getting the requisite 48 nominations to qualify him to contest. But surprises are in store.



Suhaili: 'Labuan will nominate Pak Lah for president'

But it will be a political legacy to be proud of.

"He is finally walking the talk on reform and it has put him on better standing. I see this as his final term; the monkey is off his back, as they say, and he has nothing to lose and everything to gain in doing this," said political analyst Khoo Kay Peng.

But he is still not operating from a position of strength given the demands and open threats by the Sabah group. When the centre is weak, the periphery will flex its muscles.

While many sympathise with the issues raised by the Sabah group, especially the long-standing issue of illegal immigrants, the hawks in Umno are astonished at their audacity.



Sharkar: 'Silence does not mean that everything is okay'

But the voices calling for Abdullah to resign have subsided.

Labuan's Suhaili said he was confident that many divisions would propose that Abdullah be returned unopposed as party president at the party elections in December.

"There'll be a leadership transition but we should not dictate terms to our leaders. Replacing Pak Lah will not solve anything. Labuan will nominate Pak Lah for president and Datuk Seri Najib for deputy president," said Suhaili.

The group around Abdullah is also working hard to change ground opinion in the party about him.

Last weekend, branch level leaders from eight of the 15 Umno divisions in Kedah were ferried to Kuala Lumpur to meet Abdullah. These divisions had been identified as

"hostile" and Abdullah wanted to hear them out.

There were no more calls for him to step down but they remained critical of the political situation.

They spoke of what went wrong during the elections and complained about those on top who keep saying, "yes, yes," when those below are saying, "no, no." They told him he was a weak leader, asked him to patch up with Dr Mahathir, blasted several ministers who had attacked the former Premier and told the wives of ministers to set an example and wear the tudung.

Abdullah's composure and decorum did not once slip throughout the gloves-off session.

And that is the beauty of the man.

His main problem lies within his own party, especially in the states lost to Pakatan Rakyat.

Umno is unfamiliar with rejection and they still cannot accept that they have gone from the country's most powerful party to opposition party. Umno chiefs in these states have been slow to shift gear from Menteri Besar to opposition leader and they have been of little help to him in managing grassroots sentiments.

In the Federal Territory, where the Barisan lost 10 of the 11 seats, many Umno members see the reappointment of FT Minister Datuk Seri Zulhasnan Rafique as rewarding someone who did not deliver.

Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali and Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid, former

Mentris Besar for Perak and Kedah respectively, are under pressure to resign.

"There is a groundswell of dissatisfaction. When you lose so much, it is a continuous crisis and we expect the leaders to show us the way forward," said Kampar Umno chief Datuk Radzi Manan.

Zulhasnan, Tajol and Mahdzir are three of Abdullah's staunchest loyalists and they have let him down.

Eyebrows have been raised over another loyalist, Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman, whose younger brother Anifah spurned a deputy minister post and is being wooed by the Opposition.

Some party members think the party elections at the end of the year will bring some closure to these burning issues.

Silent ground

They say the Umno ground has quietened down because people have made up their minds, somewhat like the silent ground during the general election.

"Don't take silence to mean that everything is okay. That was our mistake during the general election. We thought the silent majority was with us when they had already turned against us," said Pahang information chief Datuk Sharkar Shamuddin.

It is the lull before the storm and top leaders will have to brace themselves for the turbulence ahead.

"This has been the year of surprises for us. Three months ago, we thought we would always be in power. Today we're not even sure if we will ever be on top again. So don't be shocked if there are big surprises when the Umno divisions meet," said Sharkar.

Abdullah has been explicit about defending his post as Umno president and he will have little trouble getting the requisite 48 nominations to qualify him to contest the post.

But he must surely know by now that a number of divisions are also planning to nominate Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin for the No. 2 slot and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak for the top slot.

It is bound to result in a dilemma for the party rank and file and especially for the incumbent No. 1 and No. 2 and even for Muhyiddin, who is the party's most senior vice-president.

"It was our aim when Johor called for a clear exit plan. We want the president to be treated with dignity. We want to avert embarrassment to the president because he is part of the institution of Umno," said supreme council member and Deputy Health Minister Datuk Dr Latiff Ahmad.

Last week, *The Star* reported that Muhyiddin was mulling calls for him to move up the party hierarchy. The report generated such excitement that he was swamped with queries when he turned up at Umno's 62nd anniversary celebrations the next day.

It was a hint of how concerned party members are about the leadership transition and the future of Umno.

"Umno will know how to cross that bridge when we come to it," said Dr Latiff.