

# Poised to make a fresh start

Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein Onn is at a critical political crossroads. He is trying to put things right in Umno Youth before he makes way for someone new.

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**INSIGHT**  
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**Surviving the new landscape:** Hishammuddin felt very down, he thought long and hard about things and then went about sorting them out; seen here with youngest son Fahdhussein and wife Tengku Marsilla in the study of his Ampang home.

**D**ATUK Hishammuddin Tun Hussein was down with a cold and was wiping his nose not with the usual handkerchief but a rather large brown face towel.

"I have a big nose, it's the Turkish side of me," he joked.

His Turkish lineage is well known. He has a Turkish great-grandmother and her photograph up in his study in his home shows a rather beautiful woman with a certain air of mystery about her.

Hishammuddin's study is a very masculine type of space — brown wood, serious, unfussy and only livened up with three paintings, two of which were done by his Chinese buddy from university days. The sole hint of distraction in the room was the Euro 2008 match schedule pinned up on the wall by one of his "gila bola" sons.

This is where the Education Minister often works late into the night on his ministry files or, as his wife Datin Seri Tengku Marsilla Tengku Abdullah teased him, "where you spend all your time."

Where his aides are concerned, this is the notorious chamber from where he text messages them at one or two o'clock in the morning with instructions and queries for the next day.

He and his wife make a good-looking couple despite their physical contrast — she is tanned and gazelle-like while he is stocky with a baby-pink complexion.

He has spent many evenings in the study following the general election trying to make sense of the results, analysing what had gone wrong and, more important, what to do next.

The pressure on him has been immense. Umno lost ground among young Malay voters in the elections and the Youth wing has had to take the blame. All this has been compounded by the way people perceived his role in the *keris* episode and his deputy Khairy Jamaluddin's ultra controversial reputation.

Both were lightning rods for the Pakatan Rakyat campaigns especially in Penang and the central metropolitan. It was a very determined and, given the end result, highly successful effort to erode their standing among the non-Malays.

For several weeks after the elections, Hishammuddin admitted, there was not a night when he did not have nightmares of election losses. The trouble on waking up was that it was not just a nightmare.

"I've been through a roller coaster ride of emotions. There has been anxiety, anger, doubt and even fear but at no time did I feel any sense of hopelessness. I still have faith in this country and in Umno," he said.

It has been a terrible time for this one-time rising star.

But he has been among the first of the senior crop of Umno leaders to face up to the reality of the new political landscape where facts and truth jostle alongside the politics of perception, populism and cynicism.

"I don't like uncertainties but the old order has changed. Our role as the second echelon is to keep the party intact because the glory and heights that we were used to is not going to be there again, at least for a long while," he said.

Two days after the elections, he had the Youth chiefs of MCA, Gerakan and MIC over to his house. He knew how confused and unsettled everyone was and he thought it proper to set the tone among his counterparts. They later made a joint statement to acknowledge the people's decision and to cooperate as a coalition.



**»The old ways cannot be the same but I believe Umno is still relevant«**

DATUK SERI HISHAMMUDDIN HUSSEIN ONN

His apology over the *keris* issue came a few weeks later at another Barisan Nasional Youth meeting.

The apology drew a mixed reaction. The forum he chose to do it was significant because the issue had cost the coalition partners. Furthermore, he had not consulted any of his aides or even the Umno Youth exco.

"It was solely my decision. I am leaving the Youth wing and I want to go with a clear conscience," he said.

He felt the apology would enable Umno Youth to move on and absolve the wing of the political baggage.

"I'm not proud to say it but we seem to have scared people about the symbol of the *keris*. It has been misunderstood and I wanted to put it right. It is not easy especially in an election year and with so much at stake."

Said a long-time friend: "I feel that his responsibility for the losses has been overplayed. The *keris* incident has been a stupid, rhetorical gesture that has come to symbolise all that is not right about Umno but he is not a racist."

Those who know him talk about his reasonableness, his urbane attitudes, his willingness to listen and how he has done more for Chinese schools than any other Education Minister in history.

"But he will have to work hard to show those who don't know him that he is a politician for more than just Malays," said his friend.

Hishammuddin said he has spent much of the last few months listening to and absorbing feedback and ideas. He has formed a task force with five secretariats to look at issues pertinent to young Malays.

The media relations secretariat chaired by Machang Umno Youth head Datuk Sazmi Miah recently had its first meeting with the media and the discussion suggested that media people were less than impressed with Umno Youth. Or as one of them put it, Umno Youth should be "like ginger rather than just tumeric," that is, it should have flavour and substance apart from just colour.

The other secretariats concern nation-building, consensus building, rejuvenation and social issues and the plan is to use the feedback to shape the future direction of the wing.

### Facing a challenge

But, said a political insider, Hishammuddin's biggest challenge in the months and years ahead may lie in forces that are beyond his control.

There is a new scepticism and resentment over the *bangsawan* class of politicians or the political elite. The perception, rightly or wrongly, is that those from well known political families have exploited their connection and family name especially in the last few years.

"A well-known family name used to be a big deal but the advantage has become more

of a liability, whether we are talking about Khairy, Mukhriz (Mahathir) or even Datuk Seri Najib (Tun Razak).

"The landscape has changed so much that we cannot assume that they are solidly bankable candidates anymore. The playing field has grown more level, the environment more aggressively pro-rakyat. The *bangsawan* politicians cannot just ride on their family name, they have to prove they can really connect to the real Malaysian," said the political insider.

Hishammuddin is at a critical political crossroads or as he put it, "uncharted waters".

He has said he will not defend his position as Umno Youth leader but his interest in one of the three party vice-president posts is one of those open secrets. He has told people privately that it would be unseemly for him to declare that he is running for vice-president until he has put things right in the Youth wing.

The fact that he is not seen as a lame duck Youth chief and is still very much in charge says a lot about his standing among his Youth wing members.

But he did seem trapped between the incidents of Mukhriz asking the Umno president to resign and Ezam Mohd Nor being brought back into Umno like a hero.

"How can we be expected to act against Mukhriz when someone who had done worse things against Umno is being welcomed back by the Prime Minister?" he said.

He is very concerned about how the wing will have to reform to survive, the camps that have developed between Mukhriz and Khairy and the big fight for the Umno Youth leadership vacated by him.

One plus point is that he did not, like other leaders, indulge in self-denial after the elections. He felt very down, he thought long and hard about things and then he went about sorting things out.

"The old ways cannot be the same but I believe Umno is still relevant," he said.

The Umno grassroots is looking for leadership out of the political turmoil.

Whether Hishammuddin will figure prominently among the leadership line-up will become clearer over the next few months.