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Insight  
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# United against a common enemy

The Internet chatter going on is about a split in Umno but the party's top two leaders remain a committed partnership that enjoys the explicit backing of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.



Very special guests: Tun Dr Mahathir has used special occasions like Hari Raya to send a political signal about his feelings on issues and personalities. His presence at the Prime Minister's official residence was a big deal for Najib who is seen here giving Dr Siti Hasmah a hand as their spouses look on with some amusement.

**T**UN Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called on Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak every Hari Raya since the latter took over as Prime Minister. There is always some kind of excitement each time the former Premier turns up because his presence is seen as more than just a social thing. It tends to be read as an endorsement of sorts for Najib.

The elder statesman and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali were accorded VIP treatment as usual this year. The body language was good, with Najib holding on to Dr Siti Hasmah's hand as the senior couple made their way to their car after spending more than an hour at the Prime Minister's official residence.

Dr Mahathir remains a factor in Umno politics and Najib, unlike his predecessor, understands that very well.

Several days later, Najib and his deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin were at Dr Mahathir's annual open house. It was the first time the two top men had called at the former top man's open house at the same time, and people stared at the three, each with their own spheres of influence and clout.

"If Tun does not criticise you, that is a dividend. But it's a bonus if he endorses you," said Datuk A. Kadir Jasin, a newspaper editor during the Mahathir years.

And as Kadir noted with some irony: "The crowd at Tun Mahathir's open house gets bigger every year. Just a few years ago, people were afraid to be seen with him. Now, everyone wants to be with him."

The fact is that the big three are very much together despite the Internet chatter of a split between Najib and Muhyiddin; that Dr Mahathir is trying to push his son Datuk Mukhriz up; or that Najib is for "Malay first". The more dramatic version of such speculation goes to the extent of Muhyiddin challenging Najib with the backing of Dr Mahathir.

"I don't know where all this is coming from but there is no such thing. It's rubbish," said Umno vice-president and Rural and Regional Development Minister Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal.

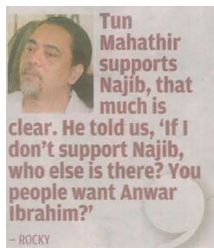
The claims genuinely puzzle many leaders in Umno, with some, like Shafie, finding it quite bizarre. Shafie is privy to a great deal of what is going on in Umno, as he sees the two top men up close and knows how they consult each other and work together.

"I think the split exists in the heads of the opposition guys. That's where the rumours have the most traction. Believe me, I'm the sort of guy who talks and dreams politics and I have not heard anything in Umno," said Kota Belud MP Datuk Rahman Dahlan.

Actually the chatter has been going around for several months and has probably made one full circle by now.

Dr Mahathir caught wind of it and posted a lengthy rebuttal titled *Menhanurkan Umno* (Crushing Umno) in his blog last month. He systematically stripped bare what he regarded as the psy-war tactics of Umno's enemies to create perceptions of a rift and cast doubts on the loyalty of the Umno deputy president.

He recognises a play when he



sees it; he had experienced it as Prime Minister. He was also not amused by reports claiming that Penawar, an NGO comprising former Umno wakil rakyat, was plotting against Najib because they did not like the direction he was taking Umno.

He did not mince his words when he pointed out quite accurately that it started when Umno's critics went to town over Muhyiddin's statement of being "Malay first".

The Deputy Prime Minister's "Malay first" remark has been distorted to imply that he does not support the 1Malaysia vision, he is a Malay ultra, and he is not with Najib.

Dr Mahathir sarcastically offered congratulations to the trouble-makers for casting suspicions among Umno leaders and members. He recalled how the opposition whips up stories of infighting in Umno whenever it wants to advance.

Shortly before Ramadan, the group of pro-Umno bloggers centred around Datuk "Rocky" Ahirudin Attan met Dr Mahathir and their discussion included Umno politics.

"Tun Mahathir supports Najib,

that much is clear. He told us, 'If I don't support Najib, who else is there? You people want Anwar Ibrahim!'" said Rocky whose "Rocky's Bru" blog is one of the most sophisticated political blogs around. It has notched up 16 million visitors since 2006.

Accounts of a split in the Umno leadership seem even more way off when one considers the fact that one man cannot do without the other.

"The question to ask is, who stands to gain if there is a fight with a critical general election ahead? Umno will be destabilised. Whoever wins would be a big loser rather than a big winner. The real winner would be the opposition. I don't see either of them messing up their only chance for survival," said Rita Sim, a fellow of the think-tank Centre for Strategic Engagement (Cense).

Dr Mahathir did his share of meddling to remove Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi after the political tsunami. But if there is one thing he will not compromise on, it is the survival of Umno. He understands that it will not be in the interest of Umno if there is a split ahead of the general election and that is why he will have no role there.

**Mahathir admirers**

What many are not aware of is that Dr Mahathir has dropped by the Prime Minister's office several times for tea and discussions. Each time, he is deluged by requests to pose for photographs with the staff. Najib's office is staffed by some pretty hard-core Mahathir admirers who play a big part in keeping the communication lines open and the relationship between the elder and younger man running smoothly.

"The relationship among the three men is solid although Tun's relationship with Najib is different from that with Muhyiddin. With Najib, it is like that of a father and son whereas his relationship with Muhyiddin is more professional in nature," shared an Umno insider.

One of the things people must understand about Najib, said the insider, is that he does not forget what people have gone through for him.

The post-2008 period was very tumultuous for Umno and extremely difficult for Najib who was then deputy Prime Minister. He had to stand by a gravely unpopular prime minister, yet heed the sentiment in Umno.

Muhyiddin recognised he had a role to play and went on to translate the feelings on the ground that Abdullah had to go, while making it known that he was doing it not for himself but for Najib to be the successor. No one, least of all Najib, forgets that sort of effort.

He sees his deputy as someone who can speak out. It is only to be expected that the DPM has greater leeway to articulate the Malay agenda whereas Najib has to carry himself as the Prime Minister of all Malaysians. Najib is tactful and subtle whereas Muhyiddin is more to-the-point, or what the Malays call *terus terang* (direct and clear). This is good though not always advantageous because that was how he fell into the "Malay first" conundrum.

DAP's Lim Kit Siang, claimed Rahman, has been at the forefront of this psy-war. A pioneer on the blogging scene, Lim has a lot of time on his hands - some say too much time - and he has used the technology and his political experience

to the hilt. He has an opinion on almost every issue, from the big to the inconsequential.

But, said Rahman, Lim has nothing good to say about the Government. Add to this his ambition to take his party to Putrajaya and you have what Rahman calls the "fiercest man" on the opposition bench in Parliament.

Lim has been on maximum attack mode since March 2008 and has opened fire at everything the top two have said or done, picking at the remarks of one to pit against the other. That the rift story has come this far shows how effective he has been and many people are buying into it because Umno's history is replete with power struggles.

No doubt there is a segment within Umno who hankers after the Umno of the old days when it was still supremely Malay and very powerful. They do not agree with the way Najib is steering the party through the new political landscape.

**No signs of a split**

But Muhyiddin understands as well as Najib that so much has changed out there that it would be untenable for Umno to go on as before. Both are on the same page on this and there is no question of pressure from the party's right wing causing a fissure between them.

However, if Barisan Nasional does not fare well in the next election, it will be hard for Najib to hold on. If Barisan does only so-so, then a fight cannot be discounted. But if Barisan does well, it will be a case of everyone loves a winner.

When it comes to a stable working relationship between the No. 1 and No. 2, the onus rests more on the second man rather than the top man. The No. 2 has to know his place and role. The No. 1 is the boss so any aspiration of an equal partnership can only lead to disaster as the 2M leadership of Dr Mahathir and Tun Musa Hitam has shown.

Many of Najib's loyalists stressed that Muhyiddin has carried himself in a correct manner and they appreciate that. At 64, Muhyiddin is six years older than the boss, and he is mature enough to know what is expected of him and what lies ahead.

"Everyone knows how Tan Sri Muhyiddin stood by Najib after the political tsunami. He resisted pressure from Dr Mahathir to take on Pak Lah even when Datuk Seri Najib refused to challenge Pak Lah for the Umno presidency. He knew his role from the start," said Perak Umno Youth politician Dr Faizal Tajuddin.

Muhyiddin, on his part, often tells his aides that he wants Umno to stay intact and that his role is to help the PM win the next general election.

Both men are mature, have loads of experience and are among the few federal figures who have had state level experience as *mentris besar*.

They share a common purpose and that is the survival of their party," said Dr Faizal.

The public only sees the two leaders from the public statements they make. They imagine that every contradictory statement means the two men are at odds. But the two communicate behind the scenes; they talk in private and at meetings. Those in Umno and the Government see that, which may explain why they know there is no rift.

Given what Umno has had to go through in the last three years, the Najib-Muhyiddin partnership has worked out surprisingly well.