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Political tug of war

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Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is finding it tougher to get his way this time around because Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak commands quite solid support in Umno. *The Star - 26/4/2015*

FOR a while, the Michael Jackson song *You are not alone* was trending in the politics of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

However, the "singer" was not the late King of Pops but Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin who, when speaking at an anti-war crimes event, had said to Dr Mahathir that "you are not alone in telling the truth".

"Telling the truth, standing up ... that is your trademark since you were a young doctor and Umno member," said the Deputy Prime Minister.

In normal times, that would have gone down as a compliment on Dr Mahathir's political style. But given that these are what the Chinese would term as interesting times, Muhyiddin's remark caused a bit of a stir on social media and, for a day or two, the Michael Jackson song was in vogue again.

The subtext to this was that a few days earlier, Dr Mahathir had lamented in that ironic style of his that, "I know I'm alone." Dr Mahathir's attempt to oust yet another sitting Prime Minister has not drawn the kind of interest as when he went on the warpath against Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Muhyiddin was invited by Tun Dr Siti Hasmah, who is the patron of the forum, and his aides have since insisted that the remark was specific to Dr Mahathir's commitment to the international anti-war movement.

The Umno deputy president knows that his every word and action is being watched - by those in Umno and also the media.

When he agreed for an audit of 1MDB, people said it showed he was not with Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. When he asked for Najib to be given a chance to perform and deliver, they said he was with Najib. Then when he told Dr Mahathir he was not alone, it went back to he is not with Najib. It ding-dongs back and forth.

Muhyiddin, said an aide, does not agree with everything coming from Dr Mahathir. He is with the Prime Minister on Cabinet policies like BR1M and GST although, like other people, he is for a thorough forensic audit into 1MDB.

He is in a sensitive position namely because as the No.2, he stands to benefit if anything happens to the No.1. Back in 2008, he had led the way to ask Abdullah or Pak Lah to go. He was unable to play that role because he was then only a vice-president.

Dr Mahathir's argument is that Umno will lose the next general election if there is no change at the top and he seems to have given his tacit approval to Muhyiddin.

But this is where his arguments



Troubled waters: The Crooked Bridge issue has cropped up again in Dr Mahathir's second attempt to oust a sitting prime minister.



Muhyiddin: Told Dr Mahathir that he is not alone.



Mukhriz: Keeping his own brand of elegant silence.



Ahmad Bashah: Kedah No.2 pulled off diplomatic coup.

run into problems. Ask any Umno leader today whether the party under a new man will do much better than under the present man and nine out of 10 Umno politicians would either disagree or say they are unsure.

Their doubts have less to do with Muhyiddin per se than the concern that it could cause a split in the party.

Even a group of bloggers who had met him recently to hear from the horse's mouth came away less than convinced over the argument that Umno will fare better under someone else.

These bloggers worship the ground Dr Mahathir walks on. They also want answers on 1MDB but a number of them said that they want to wait for the investigation report on the sovereign fund.

Najib's control over Umno is still quite solid at this point in time. When he took over from Pak Lah, it was about a man with overwhelming support taking over from one with limited support. It was easy for the party to rally behind the stronger man.

Muhyiddin's support in Umno is bigger than what Pak Lah had but it is nowhere near that of Najib. Any dramatic change is going to run into problems. The new man will be taking over an unsettled party and he will have

trouble controlling the warriors the way Pak Lah struggled to assert his authority.

And that, more than anything else, may be the eventual cause of Umno's downfall.

Moreover, the three vice-presidents are aligned to Najib and there is no stopping any of them from challenging the new man for the top post. In 2009, Najib had to personally stop the charismatic Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi from going against Muhyiddin for the deputy president post.

Dr Mahathir does not like losing and the concern of Umno members is that in order to get his way, he will take his campaign to the extent where it starts to undermine Umno.

Or as one of the pro-Mahathir bloggers put it, "menang jadi arang, kalah jadi abu" (charcoal on winning, ashes on losing), a Malay saying that describes a no-win scenario.

Until today, many in Umno are still speculating on the real reason for Dr Mahathir's fallout with Najib. As far as they are concerned, past leaders have survived worse scandals and financial fops.

There is a sense that the majority of the Umno rank-and-file are not quite convinced that what he is saying or doing will really bene-

fit the party.

Their confusion also has to do with the fact that the goalpost keeps shifting. The campaign started with 1MDB. Then it moved into a critique of BR1M and GST.

But the shocker was when Dr Mahathir joined the Altantuya circus show. That was when many realised the extent to which Dr Mahathir was prepared to go in order to win the fight.

The more thinking ones among his Umno audience also did not appreciate his attempt to equate those who support Najib to supporting the excess of 1MDB. That was too propagandish for them.

Since then, the infamous Crooked Bridge that would have taken us halfway to Singapore and the double tracking rail project have also emerged among the list of grievances that Dr Mahathir has against Najib's leadership.

The leading Chinese newspaper *Sin Chew Daily* has carried several scathing articles about the bridge, saying that it would have made Malaysia the laughing stock of the world. *Sin Chew Daily* did not think highly of the need for a halfway bridge just so that Malaysia should thumb its nose at Singapore. Malaysia's relationship with Singapore is not about who kowtows to who but it should be about mutual respect and benefit.

The Crooked Bridge and the railway project are seen as grandiose projects. Some term them as "legacy projects".

The thing about Dr Mahathir is that he has always been a big idea leader who regards such projects like the North-South Expressway, Bakun Dam and Twin Towers as part of national pride and identity, regardless of the cost.

There is also this bizarre feeling that his campaign against Najib is not entirely about Umno's future and that it is also about him having a bigger say over the direction

of the government and country. Many Mahathir-watchers think he has trouble letting go after 22 years in the driver's seat.

Whoever takes over from Najib had better be prepared to build the Crooked Bridge and the rail project or face the music.

Dr Mahathir is still revered among many in Umno and that is why Najib and the other leaders tend to tip-toe around him. They do not want to be seen as being disrespectful even though he is bashing Najib non-stop, even to the extent of insinuating that Umno grassroots leaders support him because of allocations for political programmes.

Many of them resent the jibe. They also resent the way Tun Daim Zainuddin talks down to them. For instance, they say that Daim should explain what the so-called "Daim boys" (a group of powerful Malay businessmen) were about before he preaches to them about good governance.

Dr Mahathir's list of grouses about the Najib administration is now more extensive than his grievances about Pak Lah. His criticism ranges from government policies to the "I love PM" campaign tactic used during the general election.

His latest blog posting touched for the first time on the First Lady's lifestyle. The criticism has started to shift from policies and politics to more personal things.

Muhyiddin is not the only Umno leader caught in the cross-fire. Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir is torn between showing loyalty to his father and allegiance to his party president.

The Kedah Menteri Besar is trying to keep an elegant silence. But he had a nasty shock when Bukit Lada assemblyman Datuk Ahmad Lebai Sudin asked him to resign if he could not support the Prime Minister. Ahmad Lebai also threatened to expose how Mukhriz allegedly spends more time in Kuala Lumpur where his family resides than in Alor Setar.

Mukhriz is still struggling to establish his control over Kedah Umno and he cannot afford this type of potshots. The matter died down after Kedah Umno leaders held an emergency meeting to thrash out the matter.

Kedah Umno deputy chairman Datuk Ahmad Bashah Hanipah, who chaired the meeting, made a super-diplomatic statement pledging support to Najib and Mukhriz and expressing respect for Dr Mahathir. He said Kedah leaders support the auditing of the 1MDB files and that Najib should be given time to explain.

The Mahathir typhoon will probably blow on, his health permitting.