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24 focus insight Joceline Tan



Najib stronger than ever

joceline@thestar.com.my

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Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's control over Umno was never in doubt. He has emerged even stronger after the Umno general assembly and has offered an olive branch to his estranged deputy.

A PICTURE speaks a thousand words and the empty chair adjacent to Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak during the Umno general assembly spoke volumes of the political crisis in Umno.

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin who came under fire from the delegates during the debates was missing for a significant part of the proceedings. It is not easy to sit on the stage listening to someone tell you off in front of more than 2,700 delegates.

His empty chair was like a metaphor of his political downfall, especially his sacking from the Cabinet. A government post is crucial in politics, and it has been like moving around on one leg since he lost his Deputy Prime Minister job.

Politics is a cruel game. People who were kissing Muhyiddin's hands just a few months ago are now biting at him. Some of Muhyiddin's former ministry staff complained they could not get passes for the general assembly.

And during the times when Muhyiddin was at his place on stage, the body language between the two top said it all. The pair hardly exchanged two words between them and Najib, whether deliberately or subconsciously, sat with his back half turned away from Muhyiddin.

The Muhyiddin-bashing was expected. The "kesiun wave" or sympathy was there for Muhyiddin. You could see it in the spontaneous applause and cheering when Muhyiddin and his wife made their usual rounds at the assemblies of the three wings on Wednesday.

It is a very Malay and Muslim thing to feel sympathy for those who are going through rough patches. But Muhyiddin made a colossal blunder in staging the Kampung Baru forum a few days before the general assembly. It would have been justified had he done it after being denied his chance to address the assembly. For many delegates, it was somewhat like former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad attending the Bersih rally.

The delegates took the cue from Najib's presidential speech on the opening day to speak their mind on Muhyiddin but some of them went too far in their criticism.

It is understood that the speakers were told to stop the attacks and the debate continued in a more decorous fashion after that.

One of the fiercest speakers was Bukit Mertajam Umno chief Datuk Musa Sheikh Fadzil but many people felt he had the locus standi because he is in his 70s and has a reputation for not holding his punches.

They liked it when he made an impassioned appeal to Dr Mahathir to stop trying to destabilise Najib. He recalled all the junctures in Umno's history when he had to defend Dr Mahathir even though he disagreed with what Dr Mahathir had done.

"Does he know what I went through to defend him when he



Olive branch: Najib extended an olive branch to his estranged deputy president at the close of the Umno general assembly. He is seen here leaving the PWTC accompanied by (behind him to the left) Dr Ahmad Zahid. — AP



Shahrizat: Najib is not perfect but he has been good to the Wanita wing.
Khairy: He is bringing something different to the game.

sacked Anwar Ibrahim. Not only was Anwar the DPM, he was our Penang Umno chief," he said.

He begged Dr Mahathir to show the same support for the current president.

The Telegram chat group of the Umno division chiefs was on fire with comments and congratulations for Musa even before he finished speaking. Vice-president Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal was largely spared. Many delegates seem to think he is being used by Dr Mahathir and Muhyiddin, that he is a pawn in the big game. But Shafie's wife Datin Seri Shuryani Shuaib was crushed and had reportedly sought comfort in Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor on the sidelines of the assembly. She had cried as she poured out her misgivings to Rosmah who tried to console her.

The current political turmoil in Umno pales in comparison to the some of the crises during the Mahathir era. But it has been yet another crucial political lesson on the powers of incumbency.

This particular incumbent not only has control of the machinery and resources, he is what KRA Group political analyst Amir Fareed Rahim describes as a "masterful and astute politician".

"Look at his political career, Najib is a product of the system. It's in his blood, he knows where all the nerve points are, and which buttons to press," said Amir.

Anyone who plans to take on Najib has to understand all this and it is obvious that Dr Mahathir himself has under-estimated Najib as an opponent.

The irony is that many delegates do not blame Najib for the troubles that the party is going through. Instead they are blaming Dr Mahathir for the way he has kicked up sand to get his way.

Najib's image outside of Umno is still shaky but he is unassailable inside Umno. The general assembly not only showed he is in control, but he has emerged stronger than ever.

Before this, it was part assumption and part fact that he has the support of the Umno division leaders and the supreme council. The proof of his support in the party was there for all to see the last few days.

Wanita Umno has always been the bedrock for the party and the women have again stayed above the politics.

"We know things are tough, but we have to be there for our president. I have never gone against any of our party presidents. If you don't like the president, go by the party constitution and wait for the correct time."

"People have treated Najib badly, he does not deserve it. He is not perfect but he has been good to the Wanita wing," said Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jalil.

The politics between the party's top two almost eclipsed the fact that the rest of the party has held together.

KRA Group's Amir found the level of debates at the three Umno wings to be much more mature and well-prepared this year.

Puteri Umno chief Mas Ermeyati Samsudin has found her footing and grown more focused after a shaky start. Being appointed a deputy minister has also lent her the sense of authority and prestige to move around and she is said to

be a hard worker.

Unlike previous Puteri chiefs, her relationship with the Wanita Umno wing has been smooth from the start. She is not insecure about the fact that her wing is the junior partner in Umno, she works closely with the senior leaders and does not hesitate to approach them for advice.

The Khairy Jamaluddin mania is still not over. In fact, the Umno Youth chief has an amazing following inside and, more important, outside of Umno. Part of it has to do with the fact that he has brought a fresh and dynamic style as the Youth and Sports Minister.

Even critics of Umno are interested in what he does and says and that says a lot.

Khairy had a controversial start to his career but he has matured and is bringing something different to Umno politics. He has come to represent the sort of shift or trend that people want to see in Umno, and he has the attention of the youth generation.

The younger women, of course, go ga-ga over him. One Puteri Umno politician joked that she wished she was the Puteri chief so that she could sit on stage next to Khairy.

His policy speeches at the Umno Youth assembly are something to look forward to because they are never the same old same old stuff that one gets from politicians. His challenge now is to not let all the accolades and adulation go to his head again.

There was warm applause from the Umno Youth delegates when Muhyiddin and his wife dropped in on the wing's assembly. Khairy who was seated onstage, quickly got up from his seat and came down to greet Muhyiddin. They shook hands and exchanged hugs.

It was a gentlemanly gesture from the younger man to the beleaguered leader. They are not

exactly close because the fourth floor boys around Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had not supported Muhyiddin when the latter was vying for the No. 2 post in the 2009 Umno polls. But as they say, there are no permanent friends or foes in politics.

On the surface, Khairy seems to be taking an understated part in the current Umno crisis. But there were all sorts of rumours swirling the last few months of clandestine alliances by certain Umno Youth figures to take advantage of the political crisis.

In politics, calm waters do not always mean there are no crocodiles lurking beneath. There have been a few incidents involving Umno Youth officials that raised questions as to where Khairy stands in the present crisis.

Other new alignments are also taking place. Everyone noticed how vice-presidents Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein have become besties.

Their buddy-buddy body language onstage were a contrast to that between Najib and Muhyiddin. They tried to engage their other fellow vice-president Shafie but the latter was in no mood to reciprocate. Shafie was a shadow of his normally chirpy self and looked glum and disconnected.

Dr Ahmad Zahid and Hishammuddin wanted to present a united front for everyone.

"They also want to signal that the leaders are still together in these tumultuous times. They moved around together, took lots of waffles with people and even held joint press conferences where they sometimes finished each other's sentences," said Amir.

The reconciliatory gesture that delegates were looking for came at the very end when Najib, after a spirited winding-up speech, declared he did not intend to retreat or surrender (read: I am here to stay).

Then, spreading his arms wide, he looked towards Muhyiddin and said that he wants to be magnanimous about all that has happened.

"I believe the president is saying that he does not want to sack anyone. I hope the attacks against the party and the president will end after this," said Ketereh assemblymen Datuk Alwi Che Ahmad.

As Najib walked back to his seat, he stopped to shake hands with Muhyiddin as shouts of "peluk" or embrace came from the floor.

It was quite a long handshake but the embrace did not happen. The body language was still terribly stiff and Muhyiddin and Shafie were reluctant to stand up during the standing ovation for Najib.

Too many bitter words have flown back and forth in the last one year. There will be no overnight mending of ties but at least Najib has made the first move.