

Newspaper	The Star
Date	6 December 2015

It's going to be a prickly affair

The Star - 6/12/2015

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak will preside over the Umno general assembly knowing he has strong support from his party but is stuck with 'two thorns' in his side.

THERE is an intense air of anticipation ahead of the Umno general assembly which opens on Thursday.

There is also an "anything could happen" feeling about this year's gathering, an uncertainty about what to expect given all that has happened since the party last met.

A great deal of it has to do with the one-man hurricane called Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the storm he has whipped up over the 1MDB issue.

Dr Mahathir rubbished predictions that he would boycott the general assembly and has confirmed that he and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali will be there. They will, as usual, get the best seats in the hall and be accorded the WIP treatment alongside the other former premier Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

But that is where the certainty ends and the uncertainty begins. The highlight of the opening ceremony of the Umno general assembly is the presidential address and it is going to be a super awkward moment.

Dr Mahathir will have to hear out the man he had tried but failed to replace as Prime Minister and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak will have to bring on his stiff upper lip as he gazes down on his mortal enemy.

Some even imagine that Dr Mahathir will try to pull off some kind of stunt. For sure, he will be lionised by the media but it will be



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in bad taste if he uses the occasion to demand for the umpteenth time that Najib steps down.

Dr Mahathir has broken every social norm in his bid to topple Najib and anything is possible. But this is the party's most important gathering each year and it will be terrible if he makes the party lose face.

"You can never tell with Umno but I hope the delegates will show respect to Tun Mahathir," said a Najib loyalist.

Dr Mahathir has stated his case on the 1MDB issue - not once but many times - over the past year. He has been unable to accept the fact that the majority in the party has chosen to stand by Najib and that over 70% of the powerful division chiefs support their president.

On top of that, Najib has the overwhelming numbers in Parliament. The first reading of the Budget was passed with 128 votes from Barisan

Nasional and 74 votes from the opposition bench.

Earlier on, the Barisan, in a show of strength, moved a motion to suspend DAP's Lim Kit Siang and they succeeded with 107 votes against the opposition's 77 votes.

The in-lane reading of the Budget was passed en bloc a week ago. By then, the opposition had given up - there were only 24 opposition MPs in the House and none of the opposition party heads were around.

Dr Mahathir had openly supported the opposition's bid to make the Budget a vote of no-confidence against Najib but instead, it strengthened Najib's hand.

Najib's greater concern ought to be the other thorn in his side - his deputy president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is preparing to take his grievances outside of the Umno channels.

Muhyiddin is scheduled to address a public rally at the Kelab Sultan Sulaiman in Kampung Baru on Monday night. He said the reason is because Umno has barred him from speaking at the general assembly.

"It is unprecedented not to let the deputy president speak, such a

break from tradition and a disregard for party practice. He is not Anwar Ibrahim - what else can he say that has not been said? They should have let it be," said political researcher Dr Azmi Omar.

Muhyiddin's choice of venue is quite symbolic. The Kelab Sultan Sulaiman is where Malay movements have been born. It was the stage for a number of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's rallies after his sacking and Perkasa gatherings are often held here.

A political insider summed it up well when he said that what Muhyiddin is doing is "something so un-Muhyiddin".

"It's like he feels he can no longer use the Umno platform because the place (Kelab Sultan Sulaiman) is the avenue of non-mainstream groups. He has tried to take the moral high ground but it is a cold place on the high ground," said the insider.

Muhyiddin's grassroots touch has always been rather weak. On the night he was sacked from the Cabinet, only about 10 Umno division heads gathered at his house to commiserate. But the sentiments are there, people in Umno do feel for what he was going through and

his Kampung Baru talk will probably get a bigger crowd than any of the Opposition ceramah of late. He has become a controversial figure and controversy seils.

"Criticism is normal in politics. We still love Tan Sri Muhyiddin because he is our deputy president but if his attacks start to damage the party, that is worrying," said Muar Umno vice-chief Muhammad Yazed Muhain.

Umno leaders are actually quite disturbed. They are aware that there are elements out to embarrass Najib but they are concerned that the big loser will be the party.

Those familiar with Najib insist that he is not going to feel nervous or uncomfortable with Dr Mahathir in the audience and he will be a gracious host. Najib will be upset if Dr Mahathir embarrasses him but he will also be upset if the Umno delegates embarrass Dr Mahathir.

Recently, Dr Siti Hasmah attended a Bakti badminton event. Everyone was quite tensed when Bakti president Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor arrived but the First Lady immediately went up to her predecessor and called out, "Kak 'Mah'" before exchanging kisses. The two ladies were the epitome of civility even though the husband of one lady is out to topple the husband of the other.

Umno leaders are praying for this sort of civility at the Umno general assembly - if only prayers are always answered.