

Newspaper	The Star
Date	17 May 2015

Crucial time for No. 1

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The next one month could be the most critical in the political career of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

DATUK Seri Najib Tun Razak called it the "best ever" meeting. The superlative was not surprising. The Umno president had gone into the Umno supreme council meeting on Monday expecting Areworks but emerged three hours later with his political support intact.

More important, he was able to assure everyone that he and his deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin are still together while dismissing talk of a rift as the work of rumour mongers. Najib said the party's top decision-making body wants him and Muhyiddin to work together and to resolve issues.

"It provides some comfort to those of us down here. Differences of opinion are unavoidable in a family but Umno members were confused by the president saying this and the deputy president saying that. If they are together, it gives us hope," said Kapar Umno chief Datuk Faizal Abdullah.

A full-blown crisis had been averted - for now, at least. The understanding is that Najib has been given a grace period of a month or so to sort out the IMDB or IMalaysia Development Bhd conundrum.

It could be the most critical one month of his political career and it may determine his survival.

The supreme council meeting, attended by some 50 elected and appointed members, was a no holds barred session. Many of those present spoke frankly but it was all done in what one of them called the "Malay way", that is, civil and without being hurtful.

Najib listened intently to everyone. Perhaps the one who got the attention of those around the table was appointed supreme council member Datuk Johari Ghani. The Titiwangsa MP is a chartered accountant with a corporate reputation, and he was very vocal about the IMDB problem.

"There is a lot of concern over the liability of IMDB and how problematic it is. We don't want his (Najib's) legacy to be about that. We have given our views and advice, the ball is now at his feet," said another supreme council member.

Muhyiddin, said sources, aired his anxiety about the impact of the issue on the party. He knew the comments he made in Milan, Italy, had caused a stir and added to talk of a rift. Some called it his "Italian Job", a pun borrowed from some Hollywood movie about a gold heist in Venice.

Muhyiddin knows the perception out there is that he is eyeing the top job. As such, he was keen to stress that his priority was the survival of the party in the next general election.

As some in Umno have pointed out, Muhyiddin is a "straight arrow" and does not know how to throw "curved balls".



Still friends: Najib (left) and Muhyiddin in a relaxed mood at the Umno anniversary dinner after a no holds barred supreme council meeting. The charismatic Ahmad Zahid (right) whom everyone wants on their side.



Johari: Spoke his mind at supreme council meeting. Faizal: Comforting to know top two are still together. Khairy: Delicate balancing act by Umno rising star.

"I don't think it's to undermine Najib. He's the No. 2, he needs to answer to others, he is looking for an explanation and a solution," said an Umno insider.

People at the meeting were both surprised and gratified when Muhyiddin expressed his "undivided loyalty" to Najib and said he was not out to oust him. But he did add that if the IMDB issue is not resolved, "we will be ousted".

Those present noticed that he addressed Najib as "Sir", the term used when addressing the Prime Minister. It was the depts way of couching his criticism in a respectful way.

Then again, Muhyiddin does not need to do any attacking because Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is doing it for him. The former premier has openly named Muhyiddin as the one to take over.

There has also been talk that vice-president Datuk Seri ShuGe Apdal has joined them, and that the day when Malaysia will have a Deputy Prime Minister from Sabah is not far off.

All that is very much speculation at this point in time. However, the fact that Shafie was in Mecca to perform the umrah at around the same time as Dr Mahathir was grist for the rumour mill although some insisted it would be a no-no to do anything but pray, reflect and repent in the Holy Land.

Moreover, it seemed more

than just coincidence for Najib to choose Sabah as the venue to make the speech declaring that he would not give in to pressure to resign.

Shafie is from Sabah and Najib spoke before a massive crowd alongside Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman who is a big-time rival of Shafie and who has a greater hold over Sabah Umno than Shafie. The venue was Tawau, just a short distance from Shafie's political base in Semporna.

The Sabah gathering was, rightly or wrongly, read as a message to Shafie: Assess your own support before your next move.

"Now PM knows his real friends are," said one Najib loyalist.

Or as a Kedah politician put it, some people have "started to corner already" (change direction or switch sides).

It was also the first time where Najib openly pointed out some of the flaws and mistakes of Dr Mahathir administration. He reminded everyone how he had stood by Dr Mahathir during the latter's fight with Tengku Razaleigh Ilamzah in 1987. Najib was then Umno Youth chief and his support for Dr Mahathir made a critical difference.

What Najib was trying to say is that no one is perfect. Every leader has problems and makes mistakes. But if the leader has support and is given the chance.

he can go on. Anyway, a day after the "best ever" supreme council meeting, rumours swirled about a Cabinet reshuffle. It was so rife that the Prime Minister's Office had to issue a denial. Some claimed it could have been started by Najib's supporters as a sort of warning to those who are planning to stab him in the back.

True or false, it was a good reminder to all of the powers of incumbency, that the Prime Minister is still the one who presses the buttons and calls the shots.

The vice-president whom everyone is watching is not Shafie but the charismatic Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

All the three vice-presidents are known to be Najib's men. But now that push has come to shove, it is Ahmad Zahid who has emerged as the classy gentleman. Many in Umno admire that he has not shown any sign of swaying even though he is as worried as the others about the IMDB issue.

Some attributed it to his political maturity, others said Ahmad Zahid knows that he is popular in his own right and does not need a "life jacket". He won the vice-president post with the most votes and his mass appeal in Umno will help carry whoever he is aligned to.

The Umno crowd is also watching Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin and Wanita leader Datuk Seri Shahzad Jilil. The youth are the future and the women are the backbone. Whoever wants to dominate Umno needs the two wings to come along.

Khairy has been vocal about IMDB but he has been quite hard tored.

"He has to represent the *vox populi* and also live up to the reality of Umno politics. It's not easy," said the above Umno insider.

Khairy is arguably the only young person of his generation

whom people inside and outside Umno talk about as "Prime Minister material". It explains why both sides are daiming he is with them.

In hindsight, everyone agrees that the tipping point came with IMDB's land sale to Tabung Haji. It caused a mini earthquake of sorts among the Muslim community. Tabung Haji is the custodian of the savings of ordinary Muslims who dream of performing the Haj and the outcry was unbelievable.

It was one of those fatal mistakes. Up till then the IMDB problem was too remote for the average Muslim to relate to. But the penny dropped the moment Tabung Haji got into the picture.

Dr Mahathir returned from Mecca on Friday, looking pristine in white. There was a group waiting at the Subang SkyPark to welcome him home and among them were former Umno man Khairuddin Abu Hassan and Umni Hafilda Ali, who was all dressed up and carrying a Chand handbag.

One of Dr Mahathir's admirers had asked whether he really believed that Muhyiddin is the best person to take over. The elder man admitted he was not sure and added, tongue-in-cheek, that he has been choosing the wrong people. The admirer then teased that the only right choice Dr Mahathir had made in his life was Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

This has been a tough year for Najib. He is obviously under immense stress and has lost weight. The upside to it is that he now looks much better in his dothes.

"The PM handles stress well. He doesn't show his temper and still talks properly to all of us. Both our No. 1 and No. 2, fm sure they want to see this settled amicably, nobody really wants a fight," said Lanchar assemblyman and an avowed Najib loyalist Datuk Sharkar Shamsudin.

This is also Umno's 69th year and party members joke that the situation is as topsy-turvy as in the P. Ramlee movie, *Kedatuan 69*. The movie is a comedy about a household turned upside down when an elderly man takes a new and young wife whose mother is married to his son.

Najib's support in the party has dipped but it is still stronger than that of any would-be opponents. Dr Mahathir knows that and that is why he wants a free pass for Muhyiddin.

One would think that Najib would be keeping Muhyiddin at arm's length but on Friday, he went on TV to wish his deputy Happy Birthday, long life and for Allah to bless the birthday boy with energy to build the nation.

They are still very much partners in politics but some are wondering whether Najib is keeping his friends close and his enemies closer.

The Star - 17/5/2015