

Newspaper	The Star
Date	31 May 2015

Najib goes to the people

The Star - 31/5/2015 online@thestar.com.my

It looks like a rift, sounds like a rift but it is not a full-blown rift as yet. That is how some in Umno have described relations between the party's top two.

THEY say a picture speaks a thousand words and the sight of Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin in the driver's seat of a refurbished jeep surrounded by several Umno leaders was one of those pictures.

Beside him in the passenger seat was Negeri Sembilan Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan while ministers Datuk Seri ShaDe Apdal (Rural and Regional Development) and Khairy Jamaluddin (Youth and Sports) looked on.

The picture set tongues a-wagging.

Some have tried to explain that it was a national agriculture fair in Rembau, hence, the presence of the main political stakeholders.

But these are interesting times for Umno where everything assumes a bigger meaning than it deserves and Mat Hasan, as the Menteri Besar is widely known by, found himself dragged into the fray.

Bits and pieces of his speech at the event were contorted by a pro-Pakatan Rakyat news portal to mean that Mat Hasan would sink and swim with Muhyiddin.

But it was not like that at all. Mat Hasan's speech was actually a witty and unabashed promotion of his state's famous smoked goods or *prodak salai*. Beef, chicken, duck, fish - you name it, they smoke it.

It was only at the end of his speech that Mat Hasan touched on politics and, even then, very briefly.

He had said: "Our state is known for its customary practices. As such, we will go on supporting the leadership whatever happens. We are with you, Tan Sri, and the top leadership, so that the country can face whatever is ahead. We must sail our ship through the storm until we arrive at the harbour, so that Umno and Pakatan Nasional, can continue to rule the country."

When contacted after the event, Mat Hasan said without hesitation that he is the "president's man".

"I don't believe in throwing the captain overboard when the ship is in the middle of a storm. If you don't like him, replace him in the Umno election," he said.

The IMDB issue is still unfolding but the No. 1 topic in Umno is, without a doubt, the perceived split between Muhyiddin and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

The Umno rank and file had breathed a sigh of relief after the Umno president denied a rift between him and his deputy. But they can now see that the top two were putting up a united front.

Many believe that Muhyiddin is preparing to go his own way especially after the video of him speaking at a closed-door Umno event went viral. In the video, the deputy Umno president let loose his concerns about IMDB, describing it as the straw that broke the camel's back.

Muhyiddin has taken leave and flown off to Australia for a family getaway. He seems to have taken a leaf from the public scrutiny over



Adamant to stay on: Najib, seen here in Pekan, has said that he is not going to resign because one man says so. (Inset) Muhyiddin has been vocal about the IMDB issue.



Mat Hasan: Don't throw out the captain during a storm. Shahhir: Whatever happens, one must not destroy the party. Alwi: Still emotional over the way Pak Lah was toppled

the use of the government jet because he and his family flew commercial. He will be away for about a week.

Meanwhile, Najib returned to work on Wednesday after a packed working visit to Tokyo.

Knowing Najib's political style, he will continue to treat Muhyiddin and Shafie with courtesy even though he may not be as comfortable with them as before.

Umno politicians have found it hard to define what is happening between the No. 1 and No. 2.

Is it a rift? Yes and no. They are definitely not as close as before but they can still smile and talk.

Is Najib going to step down? Sorry, that is not going to happen as yet. Najib is doing whatever it takes to sort out the IMDB mess and the question of stepping down will only arise if, and only if, the mess is unsolvable.

Umno division leaders are also very concerned about IMDB and they are frustrated over the lack of clarity. But most of them are willing to give Najib the benefit of the doubt and to wait for the Auditor-General's report on IMDB.

Will Muhyiddin challenge Najib for the post? Despite speculation about Muhyiddin's intentions, the

circle around him insists that their boss' chief concern is not to split the party.

A challenge is certainly not in the cards. The perception is that Muhyiddin, with the help of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, would prefer a free ticket to the coveted job. The two men know that Najib is quite unbeatable in Umno - for now at least.

It explains why they are escalating the IMDB issue and stepping up the pressure rather than wait for the outcome of the Auditor-General's report.

Meanwhile, Johor Baru MP Tan Sri Shahhir Samad has suggested that it is "a joke" for any Cabinet member to claim they do not know about IMDB.

The Cabinet, he said, had made a decision to refer the IMDB matter to the Auditor-General and the Public Accounts Committee, and if a minister did not understand or agree, then he should quit.

Johor leaders who attended the closed-door session with Najib were vocal and critical in their questions about the troubled investment fund.

"But Johor is with the president. That was clearly stated in Khaled (Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Khaled

Nordin) speech when we met Najib," said Shahhir.

There is no love lost between Shahhir and Dr Mahathir.

Tun Mahathir will only be satisfied if Najib steps down. I don't want to question him but I feel so sorry he is reprising issues used by the opposition, without checking his facts. He is giving new life to old issues that were exploited by the opposition. He criticises people about private jets but he flies all over in a private jet," said Shahhir.

Dr Mahathir still commands the attention and respect of many in Umno. His views have resonated among some Umno division heads and banners asking Najib to resign have popped up in places including Kepala Batas.

He attracted a standing room-only crowd when he spoke in Ipoh. People wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth.

But Dr Mahathir's relentless campaign against Najib is also starting to make the Umno stalwarts uncomfortable.

His campaign had begun on the note that IMDB plus Najib's policies and the stories surrounding his family would cause Umno to lose in the next general election.

They think he is not only determined to destroy Najib but he is also damaging the party. Many of them believe that his attacks on Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi also blackened Umno and contributed to the 2008 political tsunami.

They fear a repeat effect in the next general election.

"I have always looked up to Tun Mahathir but I'm no longer sure his objective is to strengthen Umno. He wants to make Najib go down at all costs. The issue is there but I cannot agree with the way he is doing it. He has said what he has to say, anything more will only bring down our party," said Terengganu Umno Veterans deputy

chairman Datuk Wan Albakri Mohd Noor.

The Malays have a saying for it - "marahkan nyamuk, kelambu dibakar" (torching the mosquito net out of anger for the mosquito).

But Najib is no mosquito. He is not giving in to Dr Mahathir's demands to step down.

He has gone to the Umno grassroots in a style reminiscent of what Dr Mahathir himself did during critical junctures of his career. The former premier had gone round the country when he was under siege over his attempt to rein in the Malay rulers and again when Tengku Razaleigh Hanuah challenged him for the Umno presidency.

Najib has drummed home the message that he has the mandate from the people and his party and he will not go just because one man says so.

He has also related how he supported Dr Mahathir during the Team A-Team B Oight in 1987. Najib was then the Umno Youth chief, and he was the gamechanger because Tengku Razaleigh might have been the Prime Minister had Najib not thrown his support behind Dr Mahathir.

All this, said a Najib insider, is not to refresh Dr Mahathir's memory. Najib has given up trying to talk to the elder man. The message is aimed squarely at Umno leaders and members. It is to tell them that, hey, I was there for him when he was almost drowning. I helped save him and he is doing this to me.

• He is telling the Umno rank and file: Is it fair of him to try to drown me when I had once helped save him from drowning?

The big crowds ferried to these functions are not aimed at Dr Mahathir. Najib is telling leaders in his party: You better stick by me, I have the numbers.

Some of those who were close to Pak Lah are naturally critical of Dr Mahathir's "encore performance". One of them is Pak Lah's former political secretary Datuk Alwi Che Ahmad.

Alwi, who is also Kok Lanas assemblyman, still talks about events in the final days of Pak Lah's administration as though it were yesterday. But the reason he is still so emotional and angry is because the same thing is happening once more.

"I am totally upset. I was against what they did to Pak Lah, and I am against what is happening now. None of us are happy about the IMDB thing but this is not the way to remove a leader. I am telling you, it is ruining Umno," said Alwi.

It is fortunate that Najib's style is based on consensus rather than confrontation, otherwise there would be fireworks by now. Those close to him say he is trying to cool them down rather than the other way around.

It is still a long way to the harbour but Najib has his eye on the shore.