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Striking at Dr M's heartland

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The dramatic change of Mentri Besar in Kedah has been seen as a show of strength on the part of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

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A MOTHER'S love is forever, and that seemed to be the case when Tun Dr Siti Hamidah Mohd Ali took the first available flight to Alor Setar to be there for her ex-Mentri Besar son on Thursday.

She wanted to be at Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir's side in his moment of need. The emotions rippled over her face as she wrapped her arms around him when he arrived at their old family home in Titi Gajah after announcing his resignation as Kedah Mentri Besar.

But "big M", the nickname that Kedah reporters have for Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, was nowhere in sight.

That was pretty odd, because the couple go almost everywhere together. They even attended the Bersih protest together.

Dr Mahathir is a seasoned politician and he could see that the sacking was a major set-back for him as well as his son. Both father and son had been out-manoeuvred.

What was worse was that there was nothing he could say or do because he had done the same thing in Kedah during his time as prime minister.

Moreover, a common remark making the rounds on the Mukhriz sacking had been: Mahathir tried to topple Najib, instead his own son was toppled in Kedah.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, said former Umno MP Tawfik Ismail, appears to have timed it to pass the message to everyone that Dr Mahathir is not a sacred cow.

"It was directed at the heart of the enemy and the son has been made the scapegoat," said Tawfik.

For a fortnight, the twists and turns in the Kedah political crisis gripped the attention of many people all over.

The Kedah episode was not as contentious and toxic as the Perak crisis. Neither was it as controversial and convoluted as the Selangor Mentri Besar power struggle. But it was no less fascinating partly because of the famous family name involved.

And, of course, it was more than just a case of Mukhriz versus the Kedah Umno warlords. Rightly or wrongly, it was perceived as a proxy fight between Najib and Dr Mahathir.

The Mahathir-Najib war is still on and Kedah became the battleground with Mukhriz being the latest battle casualty.

Two other big names had preceded Mukhriz's fall, namely, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal who were sacked from the Cabinet.

But the Kedah strike must have been particularly embarrassing for Dr Mahathir because it confirmed what many in Umno already knew - Dr Mahathir does not have a hold on Kedah Umno politics.

"I've been reading some of the political blogs. They are claiming it is another step-up for Najib, even Kedah Umno supports him," said Datuk Wan Albakri Wan Md Nor of



Tiger politics: Najib's removal of Mukhriz (left) from the Kedah top job was a direct strike at his nemesis Dr Mahathir (right).



Dr Azmi: Dr Mahathir did not have to deal with social media.

Wan Albakri: The outcome is another step-up for Najib.

the Umno Veterans group.

Dr Mahathir has never had much traction in his home state. Back in 2006, Dr Mahathir, then on the warpath with Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, had contested in his old division of Kubang Pasu to become a delegate to the Umno general assembly. He lost to younger and lesser known people.

Prior to that in 2004, Mukhriz, hoping to ride on his father's name in Kubang Pasu, lost in the contest for the division's Umno Youth chief post.

Kedahans are proud of the former prime minister but there have always been rumblings that he did not do more for Kedah.

According to Tawfik, there has been no consistency in the management of Kedah even though it has produced two prime ministers.

"The state capital reflects the success of the government. But Alor Setar is quite sleepy and has never had much attention, not even during Mahathir's time," said Tawfik.

Kedahans used to complain that Dr Mahathir treated Langkawi like a favourite child while the rest of the state felt like stepchildren.

The Regency Council has also been feeling the heat but the state civil servants said the royal body stuck to the Constitution and carried out its duties in a thorough fashion. What happened in Kedah shows that incumbency is important in Malay heartland politics. The one with the position

holds the carrot and the stick.

The Mahathir magic is also not what it used to be. Part of it has to do with the fact that he is no longer the prime minister, has no party position and no longer calls the shots.

The other part has to do with his attacks on Najib. As researcher Dr Azmi Omar pointed out, almost every accusation he had made against Najib, he himself is guilty of having done the same or worse, be it the use of draconian laws, financial losses, cronyism and even the sacking of their respective deputy prime ministers.

Najib appears to have timed it to pass the message that Mahathir is not a sacred cow. It was directed at the heart of the enemy and the son has been made the scapegoat.

Tawfik Ismail

"Some of us are still wondering what is actually the real reason for Tun Mahathir's continuing attacks. Is it really about the IMDB or is it about political ego? His own administration was more controversial, loaded with bigger losses except that there was no social media to ramp it up," said Dr Azmi. The attacks have damaged Najib quite irreversibly especially among the urban middle class. But the thing is, Dr Mahathir's 22 years was not one glorious and unblemished journey. It was a mix of the good, the bad and the ugly.

Many Malaysians were quite prepared to move on from the bad and ugly parts but his attacks on Najib have rekindled all sorts of old memories and stories.

Dr Mahathir could not rally people around him, the momentum was simply not there because it is never appealing to hear the pot calling the kettle black.

Almost every accusation he made reminded people of his own track record. His own legacy has been damaged.

"He used to tell people not to overstay their welcome. His health tip is to stop eating just before you feel full. Now he has gone against all his own rules," said Dr Azmi.

The Kedah episode also exposed the double standards of the opposition parties. Opposition leader Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail instructed the opposition assemblymen in Kedah to press for an emergency assembly sitting to vote on the issue.

Yet, when her party wanted to topple Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim in Selangor, she was unwilling to have an emergency assembly sitting and preferred to go by way of statutory declarations to get in.

The other irony is that Najib's first six years as Prime Minister have drawn parallels to Dr Mahathir's own first six years.

"Mahathir had a lot of problems but after he won the Umno fight in 1987, he cleared the party of all his rivals and enemies. We are still feeling the aftermath of that. The direction for Umno would have been different if we had followed the tracks of the founding fathers," said Tawfik.

Najib, he added, is doing the same now, clearing the decks of his opponents.

It has been said that Najib is going by Dr Mahathir's playbook but after what happened in Kedah, it looks like the student is turning the master's craft into a fine art.

The Kedah affair is yet more proof of Najib's entrenched network among the Umno division chiefs

and their loyalty to his leadership.

By now, most people in Umno believe that Dr Mahathir will not stop until he brings the whole house down. What he is doing sits so well with the opposition that a DAP MP from Johor has urged him to join the opposition cause.

"His son has been sacked; he has nothing more to lose. He can bring out all his canons. His earlier mantra was that the country will go bankrupt because of IMDB. Next, it will be that BN will lose the general election. Anything awful, he will be on to it," said Dr Azmi.

He will continue to pursue the IMDB issue and to rely on the Sarawak Report whose credibility is hammered every day.

"Nothing will satisfy him. I think Umno will continue to tolerate him even if they do not give him the attention. It's the Malay way, we don't send our elderly to the old folks home. We have them around, humour them, take them out for a walk, for a meal," said Tawfik.

The political ripples from the last two weeks of drama have yet to smoothen out and there are all sorts of jokes on social media about Mukhriz as well as the new Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah. The losers are still hurting while the winners cannot really celebrate as yet.

But it has been a stunning show of strength on the part of Najib.

The Monkey Year takes off tomorrow according to the Chinese calendar and the feng shui folks say it will be a rather gloomy year.

But as far as the folks in Umno are concerned, Najib is beginning to look like the proverbial smiling tiger, especially after what happened to Mukhriz. The smiling tiger can strike or spring at any moment.

Others say he is riding the tiger and has not fallen off.

But the Chinese saying about riding the tiger has more ominous implications because he who rides the tiger cannot dismount or else he gets eaten.