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Wheels of change are in motion

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The Kedah Mentri Besar crisis is expected to be settled soon because Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has secured the numbers and arrangements are being made for an audience with the Agong who is also Sultan of Kedah.

THERE must be something about the air in Langkawi because Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak wore a big smile wherever he went on the island.

And so did Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir despite the fact that he is hanging on to his Mentri Besar job by a thread.

The only trouble was that the two men were not exactly smiling at each other.

There was hardly any eye contact between them and Najib barely spoke to the younger man. At times, the younger man seemed like a bystander rather than the host.

When they sat down for a seafood lunch at the fishermen jetty, Najib seemed more interested in chatting with everyone but Mukhriz who was seated on his left.

Every politician needs to have some acting skills for occasions like this. Relations between the two men have deteriorated since last year when Mukhriz joined his father to criticise Najib over the IMDB issue.

Every move and gesture of the two men was scrutinised by the media which has been intensely covering the crisis over the Mentri Besar issue.

"No chemistry," was how one photographer summed up the encounter between the two leaders.

Najib had spent the weekend in Langkawi for a number of functions and protocol required that the Mentri Besar be around.

Mukhriz has said he is not resigning because he has the people's

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analysis

support. But the Langkawi episode is a hint of what will happen if the Mentri Besar insists on staying on without the support of the Prime Minister.

The move to replace Mukhriz has been set in motion and a total of 19 of the 21 Barisan Nasional assemblymen have signed statutory declarations supporting a change in Mentri Besar. Only Mukhriz and Jitra assemblyman Datuk Aminuddin Omar did not sign.

"Most of us have signed the letters. As for the new MB, we will leave that to the president to decide," said Bukit Lada assemblyman Datuk Ahmad Lebai Sudin.

Ahmad Lebai, whose ties with Najib goes back to their years in Umno Youth, was the one who started the ball rolling last year by asking Mukhriz to step down.

The last person to sign the statutory declaration was Datuk Suraya Yaacob, who is Sungai Tiang assemblywoman and a state exco member. Suraya was seen as a Mukhriz loyalist and had been critical of the move to unseat Mukhriz.

However, it is learnt that Najib asked to meet Suraya on Sunday and had greeted her, saying: "Ah, the elusive lady."

They had a very frank discussion and finally, at about 6.30pm, she



Different directions: Najib seemed more interested in chatting with everyone but Mukhriz who was seated on his left during a seafood lunch in Langkawi.

gave in and signed on the dotted line.

But there is still the Palace factor to settle. The Kedah royalty has no objections to a change of Mentri Besar but the decision on who they will accept is still anyone's guess.

This has led to intense speculation and some degree of lobbying among viable candidates.

Najib is believed to favour deputy state Umno chairman Datuk Seri Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah who is currently a senator and Deputy Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism Minister.

Corporate figure Datuk Guntor Tobong, who is from the Alor Setar Umno division headed by Ahmad Bashah, described the latter as a team player.

"Looking at the history of MBs in Kedah, the ones who did well were those with the *kampung* touch, Kedah is one of those places where people expect the MB to be like one of them," said Guntor.

For instance, Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain lasted three terms even though his most obvious talent was talking and mingling with people. His house was open to all and sundry with people waiting to see him from early in the morning. He was eventually "toppled" by a crippling stroke.

Asked what makes Ahmad Bashah a potential Mentri Besar candidate, Guntor said without hesitation: "His strong point is friendship, everyone is his friend."

Najib will have to seek an audi-

ence with the King who is also the Sultan of Kedah to present the request for a change and for the royal consent on the new man.

If and when he secures the royal agreement, he will need to make a courtesy call on the Regency Council in Alor Setar.

The procedures call for protocol and cannot be rushed. Moreover, the King has been unwell and was recently treated at IJN.

However, Umno circles are predicting that there will be a new Mentri Besar by next week.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was also in Langkawi on Sunday although he did not cross paths with Najib.

There were no big smiles from him and he did not look happy. His son is about to become a short-lived Mentri Besar and he predicted that Kedah would fall in the next general election if there is a change of Mentri Besar.

Then again, he has also predicted Barisan will lose Putrajaya if Najib stays on as Prime Minister

Najib had heaped praises on Langkawi during an event that saw AirAsia flying in a plane-load of China tourists in connection with its inaugural flight from Guangzhou.

The Prime Minister described Langkawi as a "gem that is priceless to the nation". Well, that could be the only thing he and Dr Mahathir have in common these days.

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal and now Mukhriz - the Mahathir-Najib fallout is about to claim another big-name victim.