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Politicking the M'sian way

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It's all about politics now but sooner or later, healing the country's bruised economy should take centre stage again.

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THE unthinkable in Malaysian politics has taken place but it is mere wishful thinking if anyone believes that the Prime Minister is now in such a precarious position that he will now be forced to quit soon.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is certainly not in the most ideal position and certainly his image internationally has taken a beating but on the contrary, he has in fact strengthened his grip in the party.

Except for a few renegade divisions, most of the 191 divisions are solidly with him. So are the members of the powerful supreme council.

The branches that have come out to oppose Najib remain too insignificant to make any serious challenge.

By simple logic, the fact that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and suspended deputy president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin have to solicit the support of the opposition basically means that they could not muster the troops in Umno.

Dr Mahathir and Muhyiddin understand the politics of Umno well. They must have looked behind their backs and realised the harsh reality that not enough soldiers were with them.

Politics is a numbers game. It is also about power – the ability to reward and punish. If you don't hold the power, then one can only promise hope but is unable to place the rewards on the table to win support.

By now, Muhyiddin and his loyalist, Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal, would have realised that their political lives have become much lonelier. There will be fewer calls and appointments now.

Despite the negative international press coverage against Najib, giving the impression that he is living on borrowed time, the Umno president has grown stronger internally and gone on the offensive.

The instruments of power are with him and he wields tremendous political clout now, with only loyalists in place.

Even in countries like the United States where there is supposedly a clear separation of power to keep the three branches of government – the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary – in check, the fact remains that it is the White House that determines most of

the appointments.

That is why there is so much debate now on who President Barack Obama will name to the Supreme Court to take over from Justice Antonin Scalia, who passed away recently.

The head of government in all countries always make sure that Cabinet appointments and other key positions in the police and army are filled by people whose loyalty is assured.

This is the power of incumbency and even first year political science students would know that is how leaders work to ensure they are in command.

Despite the negative international press coverage against Najib, giving the impression that he is living on borrowed time, the Umno president has grown stronger internally and gone on the offensive.

Removing Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir as Kedah Mentri Besar and suspending Muhyiddin is just the beginning.

A leader can only strike when he is in a strong position whereas the weak has to go on the defensive. In this case, Najib, who has been in politics for 40 years, has realised by now that nobody listens to a nice guy, who is often mistakenly regarded as weak.

The Cabinet's decision on Friday to remove Dr Mahathir as Petronas adviser is not unexpected. Expect Najib to swing his axe further – as he removes those holding influential positions but have not supported him.

Najib's continued hold in Umno and government is not determined by the Wall

Street Journal or New York Times but by his party. Likewise, no one in Umno can remove Lim Kit Siang or Lim Guan Eng from DAP except DAP members.

But for all their political experiences, Dr Mahathir and Muhyiddin also committed a big blunder in seeking the support of DAP, which is unacceptable and even unforgivable in Malay politics.

Working with PAS, purportedly in the interest of the ummah, is politically acceptable. So too is flirting with PKR, as many PKR leaders were in Umno before.

But to sit next to DAP is a costly mistake for Dr Mahathir and Muhyiddin, and the former has now conceded that Umno members are unhappy with the association. But he has defended his actions, saying he has few choices.

Only one thing holds the unimaginable alliance together – to remove Najib over the 1MDB investment fund controversy.

The majority of Chinese voters, especially in the urban areas with their anti-establishment sentiments, have little understanding of how the rural Malay heartland feels.

They are unable to grasp the intrinsic of Malay politics and due to wishful thinking, they have convinced themselves that the Malay electorate would rise up and join them in voting against Umno.

They cannot comprehend why the Malays in the rural heartland do not embrace and love DAP as they do.

Their benchmark of Malay support of the opposition is also PKR and they forget that PKR's base is mainly the urban Malays, mostly in Selangor.

After giving their huge support to PAS in the 2013 elections, and having actually convinced themselves that PAS would never implement hudud, the Chinese voters are now coming to terms that PAS theologians have consistently said they want an Islamic state.

It's just that in the election euphoria, the Chinese voters have chosen not to accept this political reality.

The absence of PAS among the opposition ranks does make a difference as is obvious from the Bersih4 rally and the Citizens

Declaration event.

What is clear is that a big Malay opposition party isn't taking on Najib, as what an opposition is supposed to do.

For Chinese voters who are angry with Umno, perhaps they should ponder this: What happens if the majority of Malays dump Umno and vote for PAS instead?

Think of the implications to Malaysia. As the saying goes, be careful what you wish for.

Malaysians are also still shaking their heads in disbelief that the man whom Dr Mahathir put in jail for sodomy has now come out to support his nemesis in his plan to topple Najib.

The situation can be considered bizarre but Dr Mahathir has transformed himself to be the de facto opposition leader, although he prefers to call it the citizens revolt.

The 90-year-old leader himself described the group of mostly retired politicians "as a very strange group of people".

Most analysts who care to read Malaysian politics in a balanced and rational matter would agree that the group would be unable to topple Najib but the group can also cause damage to Barisan Nasional and Umno as they continue to chip away the armour.

It will be naive if Umno leaders arrogantly dismiss this movement, which is certainly going to make its voice heard.

Yang Razali Kassim, a senior fellow with S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological in Singapore, aptly wrote that "any misplaced sense of supreme confidence on the part of Umno could, however, backfire" and that "it would be foolhardy to take lightly what the 90-year-old warhorse is now doing, which may well lead to big changes in Malaysian politics".

He warned of the impact to Barisan and Umno in the next general election, "if Dr Mahathir and his citizens' movement grow, and the opposition recovers from its disunity".

There's never a boring day in Malaysian politics but the daily politicking could well take its toll further on the bruised Malaysian economy which needs the complete full attention of Najib.