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End of yoyo times for Umno

The drama is over, the enemy is no longer within and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak will take to the Umno general assembly stage on a stronger footing to prepare his party for the big one.

UMNO delegates were left numb and confused after the last party general assembly.

There was so much drama on stage, the tension between their president and then deputy president was palpable and they could see how the olive branch held out by Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak was spurned by Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

The political theatre eclipsed everything else and everyone could see a crisis developing right before their eyes.

It has been a yoyo year for Umno but the worst of the crisis has blown over and the Umno general assembly this week will see a stage where the enemies are no longer within but outside where they can be clearly identified.

No one can quite predict what things will be like without Muhyiddin and Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal but, as vice president Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein is fond of saying, the party is bigger than the individual.

Leaders come and go but the party will be there.

Umno has been badly battered by its internal crisis and it is still healing. But, politically speaking, the party is on a stronger footing than before.

As for Najib, he is unshakable in the party. The Prime Minister and Umno president has been looking quite sanguine whether on the home front or in the international arena.

"He is sitting strong after surviving so many attempts to bring him down. Each failed attempt has fortified his position," said an Umno official.

Moreover, he is now surrounded by people he trusts. He does not have to keep looking around to check for snakes in the grass.

Every political leader needs loyalists around him even if his detractors would say that he has buffered himself with yes-men.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who has been with Najib since the latter's days as Umno Youth chief, recently declared that he is 101% loyal to Najib.

Hishammuddin is his cousin and, as they say, blood is thicker than water.

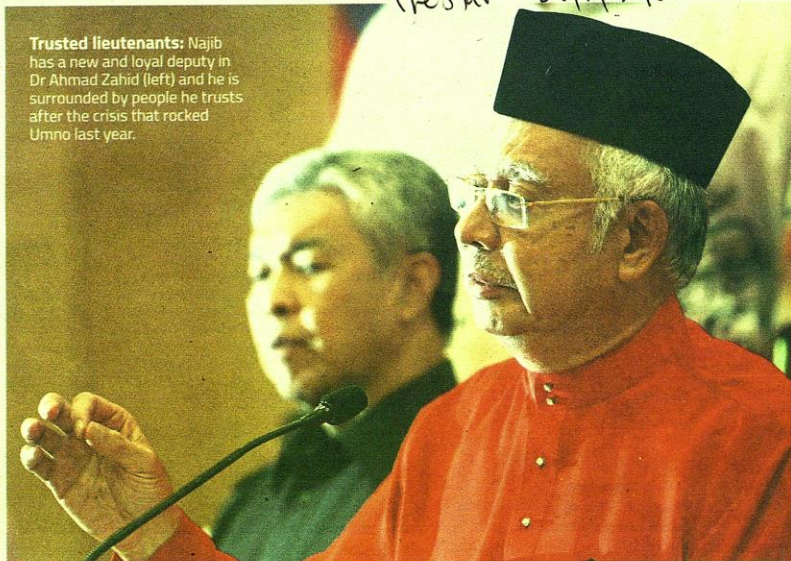
Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and supreme council member Datuk Rahman Dahlan has also emerged as one of Najib's most trusted lieutenants and is widely seen as a future vice-president.

Rahman stood by Najib and defended him through some of his most difficult months the last two years, and the president is not going to forget that.

Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin is said to have come on board. Khairy was clearly keeping his distance for much of last year.

His body language at the last general assembly was rather cold and aloof compared to that of the other supreme council members.

But everything has changed



Trusted lieutenants: Najib has a new and loyal deputy in Dr Ahmad Zahid (left) and he is surrounded by people he trusts after the crisis that rocked Umno last year.



Sharkar: We want to focus on our achievements.

Khairy: He will defend the president and party.

Rahman: One of Najib's most trusted lieutenants.

Dr Faizal: Cost of living issue to feature in debate.

since the Youth and Sports Minister was appointed the moderator for the new national-vision, TN50 or National Transformation 2050. He feels motivated, it has given him a new purpose in his politics and he wants to reciprocate the recognition by the Prime Minister.

Khairy's policy speech at the Umno Youth assembly on Wednesday should be something to look out for. He is said to be getting ready to show that he wants to be on Team Najib. He intends to show that he can defend his president, party and government.

It goes to show that in politics, loyalty can be a dynamic definition.

"We were sidetracked by internal strife at the last assembly. The distractions are gone, we can focus on what is important," said Datuk Sharkar Shamsudin who is Temerloh Umno division chief and Pahang state exco member.

Umno members are also feeling the political fatigue. They are tired of the politicking and the endless slanging matches which have distracted elected representatives from delivering to the people who elected them.

The feedback thus far is that cost of living issues will feature in a big way during the debates at the general assembly. It is the No. 1 issue based on feedback from Umno divisions all over the country.

People are feeling the pinch and the recent cooking oil shortage only underscored the pressure that the working class has to go through.

"The pressing concerns among our grassroots especially in the rural areas are bread and butter issues, not 1MDB or the China deals. They feel that everything has gone up (in price). They are asking what has happened to the promises to control rising costs and make things easier for them," said Pasir Salak Umno politician Dr Faizal Tajuddin.

The heat will be on Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism Minister Datuk Hamzah Zainuddin.

"It is difficult for our grassroots leaders to face our members. We need to manage such issues, as we go into the election," said Dr Faizal.

Umno, said a public affairs consultant, cannot run away from addressing basic needs. It is critical

to their support among Malays and the Malay ground will punish them if it is not addressed.

There will also be no running away from debating the issue of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the man who took Umno to its heights and who is now trying to run their party to the ground.

It will take maturity and skill for the speakers to criticise Dr Mahathir without coming across as disrespectful or un-Malay.

But they feel that this is the appropriate arena to defend the party and their president and to point out the betrayals and contradictions of the man they had once put on a pedestal.

Their former president evokes a range of emotions in Umno. Some still love him but cannot accept his alliance with DAP. The more informed class in the party are appalled at what they call his hypocrisy and how he has gone against almost everything that he used to stand for when he was Prime Minister.

But nobody has said it like Tourism and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz who called

the former Premier "a senile old man". Nazri will probably be the next to feel the wrath of Dr Mahathir.

"For the first time in his life, he has lost the fight. He cannot dictate to Najib," said Sharkar.

However, Umno leaders are not underestimating Dr Mahathir. He is not what he used to be but he can still do damage especially in Kedah where parochial feelings still linger.

The exit of Muhyiddin and Shafie will have to be handled with a deft touch because they were big names in their respective states.

"I'm from Perak, they don't have a lot of impact there. Their absence will not be sorely missed especially now that they are dancing with DAP," said Dr Faizal.

The Enemy No. 1 of Umno is now DAP and not Dr Mahathir.

PAS, a one-time Enemy No. 1 of Umno, is now considered a brother in Islam. The body language between PAS and Umno leaders has been growing warmer ever since PAS severed ties with DAP.

Umno has had enough with the relentless attacks by DAP and they want to retaliate.

DAP is the strongest pillar in Pakatan Harapan just as Umno is the main pillar in Barisan Nasional. DAP rode to success by rallying the Chinese voters against Umno. It is going to be tit for tat and the general assembly will see DAP become the whipping boy for everything that Malays are concerned about. It will be pillar versus pillar.

"My father is 82, he loves Dr Mahathir but he cannot accept DAP. I can confidently say that 90% of the members in my division feel this way. We have to draw the line that leaders who share the stage with DAP are our enemies," said Kapar Umno division chief Datuk Faizal Abdullah.

DAP is still a stigma for Umno members and going for DAP is just another way of telling the rank and file that Dr Mahathir has broken faith with them by aligning with the No. 1 enemy.

However, Umno leaders say they are not interested in dwelling too much on the disarray in the opposition but they want to counter the outlandish allegations made by their opponents.

"We want to give our members hope and to remind them of our strengths and achievements. We have come a long way, this country is not bankrupt nor are we a failed state. We intend to win the general election," said Sharkar.

Terengganu Umno information chief Wan Hakim Wan Mokhtar said the momentum has been with Barisan after the Sarawak election victory and the big wins in Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar.

"The attacks against us have been fierce. But it has peaked, the wind is no longer howling. The wind has changed, we can feel the momentum," said Wan Hakim who is also the Air Putih assemblyman.

The drama is over and it is time to get down to business.