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# Zahid goes on a blitz against Dr M

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The DPM's attacks on the former premier was seen as apple polishing by some and revenge by others but he says he has no choice but to counter the man who is trying to destroy Umno.

THE invitation letter from the Shah Alam Umno division was sent months ago and division chief Datuk Azhari Shaari had given up hope that his party president would be able to make it.

But about a week before the AGM, the Prime Minister's Office informed Azhari that Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak would be officiating at his division meeting. There was a mad rush to welcome and impress the big boss.

Shah Alam is an urban constituency dominated by middle-class Malays and Azhari was under tremendous pressure at the height of the 1MDB issue.

During his speech at last year's AGM, Azhari had blurted out that the 1MDB issue had hit them like an "atomic bomb".

Azhari survived the "atomic bomb" and he was over the moon about Najib coming to his division.

Shah Alam is the capital of Selangor and everyone thought Najib wanted to send a strong message about Barisan Nasional's quest for Selangor. But Najib also had something else in mind, namely, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

The Umno top three had a private discussion last week and Najib and Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein had told Dr Ahmad Zahid, "don't worry, we will back you up".

Najib used the Shah Alam rostrum that afternoon to come out strongly for his deputy who had been through a roller-coaster week over the "Mahathir a/l Iskandar Kutty" firestorm. Dr Ahmad Zahid has been torpedoed by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad for reprising his Indian ancestry. But he had taken the bullets for his boss and the boss was returning the favour.

Najib described his deputy as his friend and comrade. Without once mentioning Dr Mahathir's name, he said a former leader of 22 years is trying to drive a wedge between them because the latter did not understand that their relationship goes back to the 1980s, when they were in the Umno Youth movement.

He then went into some detail about the political persecution Dr Ahmad Zahid endured under Dr Mahathir, his detention under ISA and how he was forced to quit as Umno Youth chief.

The stark paradox of Dr Mahathir's action sunk in with the Shah Alam crowd when Najib said: "Can you imagine if I were to put the Umno Youth leader under ISA?"

It is such historical incidents that explain why Umno members are so bitter about what Dr Mahathir is doing today. They defended him even after he sacked their deputy president and used the ISA against their Umno Youth leader, yet he has now turned against them.

It was the first time Najib had spoken so openly about his friendship with his deputy. He was basically telling his party that he does not doubt the loyalty of his deputy and there is no rift.

"The divisions are about grassroots power and the Shah Alam



**Long-time comrades:** Zahid's bombardment of Dr Mahathir since the start of the Umno division AGMs was a very public display of loyalty to Najib.



**Sharkar:** 'We cannot be sentimental about Mahathir, he wants to destroy us.'

**Amir:** 'They are telling the Umno grassroots not to take Dr Mahathir lightly.'

**Azhari:** The Shah Alam Umno division chief survived the 'atomic bomb'.

meeting was an opportune time to explain that. It's about timing," said political risk consultant Amir Fareed Rahim.

After what he went through with his former deputy, Najib appreciates the loyalty and friendship of Dr Ahmad Zahid. Moreover, he has no intention of having one deputy after another despite being accused of going by the Mahathir playbook.

Dr Ahmad Zahid had confided to an associate that Najib, when offering him the Deputy Prime Minister post, had said that he hoped they could work together like how they used to when they were in Umno Youth.

"Mahathir is our political enemy. He is with the other side, we cannot be sentimental about him because he wants to destroy us, his party wants our seats. We have to treat him the way we treat Lim Kit Siang and Anwar Ibrahim," said Temerloh Umno chief Datuk Seri Mohd Sharkar Shamsudin.

The stakes, said Amir, are very high for Umno.

"I can see they are trying to condition the grassroots and party faithful with a strong narrative and signal that Mahathir is their opponent. They cannot take Mahathir or his party lightly," said Amir.

Najib's Shah Alam speech was a boost for Dr Ahmad Zahid given that Dr Mahathir had insinuated that he is trying to undermine Najib.

Shortly after he was made Deputy Prime Minister in 2015, Dr

Ahmad Zahid paid courtesy calls on two party elders - Dr Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

He knew Dr Mahathir had never liked him, the elder man saw the younger man as an acolyte of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who had become a threat to Dr Mahathir.

However, Dr Ahmad Zahid wanted to get off on a good footing. He should have known better because by 2015, Dr Mahathir had gone sour on Najib and the conversation from the meeting has been used against him.

But as Dr Ahmad Zahid said: "I had been DPM for only 10 days when the meeting took place. It does not make sense that I would try to oust Najib after only 10 days."

The charismatic Perak leader had decided to go on a blitz against Dr Mahathir from day one of the Umno division AGM season.

The first shot was fired at his Bagan Datuk division last month. He warned a "certain leader" to watch what he said about Najib. He told the leader his time was over and to sit back and recite religious verses.

"This leader accused Anwar of all kinds of things, now he says Anwar was victimised and wants to free Anwar," he said, accusing the leader of performing a *korna baring*, a Malay slang for sharp cornering.

Since then, he has made that "certain leader" the No. 1 topic at

almost every division meeting he has been to.

In Alor Setar, he called the leader a *cengkadak* or praying mantis which likes to eat its prey alive.

"The *cengkadak* accused me of trying to topple the president but when he was the No. 1, he had problems with whoever was his No. 2," he said.

In Baling, he said that during the bloody clash in Meralah, the leader had lied about his whereabouts and blamed the tragedy on his then deputy Tun Musa Hitam.

In Temerloh, he said the leader, who is throwing stones at Umno, has treated Umno like a hotel where he can check out when he does not get his way, alluding to the number of times Dr Mahathir had quit Umno.

He told the Jerlun meeting how, because of the leader, he was detained under the ISA and Special Branch officers were sent to force him to resign as Umno Youth leader. Then he had to sign another letter to say he was not forced.

"He may have forgotten what he did but I was like the deer caught in a trap. How can I forget what it was like in the trap?" he said.

Some see the attacks as an attempt to *bodek* (apple polish) the boss but he regards it as the responsibility of a senior Umno leader.

"Dr Ahmad Zahid's survival and career is hinged on Najib and he wanted a public display of loyalty to Najib," said a Malay business figure.

In a way, Dr Ahmad Zahid got the No. 2 post on the misfortune of someone else and he will only feel secure when he earns it the right way at the next Umno election.

The seat was something he had always dreamt of but it is not the most comfortable place for this son of a *kampung ustaz*, being sandwiched between two cousins whose fathers were Prime Ministers.

To compound the situation, Najib and Hishammuddin are worldly and sophisticated, they were educated overseas, speak the Queen's

English and are part of that upper crust who know which fork and knife to use at a formal luncheon.

Dr Ahmad Zahid came from a different world as anyone who has passed through Bagan Datuk would know. But his humble roots gave him an instinctive feel of the hearts and minds of the ordinary folk who see him as one of them.

He was the first Umno leader to build a private *surau* in his home back in the 1990s and he does not suffer from the sense of entitlement that make some privileged offspring such a pain to deal with.

He does not take anything for granted and, up to this day, he makes it a point to thank people who help him.

Still, the sense is that he has to try doubly hard to convince people he deserves to be up there.

Dr Mahathir does not take attacks lying down and he has returned fire with a few choice names, calling his attacker *kaki pembohong* (habitual liar) and saying he is ashamed the Cabinet has people like that. He also zeroed in on Dr Ahmad Zahid's wealth, claiming that the latter had assets worth RM230mil in 1996.

The "Mahathir a/l Iskandar Kutty" incident was what the above business figure called a "keris moment" for Dr Ahmad Zahid, referring to how brandishing the keris had damaged Hishammuddin back in 2005. It has made him unpopular with some segments but popular with others.

In hindsight, he is perhaps the most apt person to go after Dr Mahathir. Unlike many other Umno leaders, he does not owe anything to the elder man who tried to destroy his political career along with that of Anwar.

The accusations and counter accusations will go on but Dr Ahmad Zahid, who is an Umno vice-president, has subtly rebalanced his standing in the Umno hierarchy.

He is likely to end the Umno division AGM season a step closer to becoming Umno's next deputy president.