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Tide has turned for Najib

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The Opposition claim that Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is stepping down could not be further from the truth. He is on attack mode and has switched up the we-can-win rhetoric.

THERE is a rather weird story going around that the Prime Minister will resign before the general election.

According to the story, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak will step aside for Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein to take over.

The account originated from Amanah deputy president Salahudin Ayob, the man whom Amanah would have made the Menteri Besar had Johor fallen in 2013.

Salahudin is extremely likeable, and a rare gentleman politician but how on earth did he come up with this ridiculous story?

It seems like he does not understand the hierarchical nature of Umno politics nor what power is all about.

The Umno house will erupt like a volcano if Najib hands over the top job to his cousin Hishammuddin over the head of the very popular Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. Moreover, Dr Ahmad Zahid is already the Deputy Prime Minister and that means something in Umno.

Najib is a political animal, with a playbook that now has more chapters than the playbook of his former sifu Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. People like him do not walk away from power just like that.

Salahudin's imagination was apparently triggered by the appointment of Hishammuddin as Special Functions Minister. It was less a case of fake news than about adding two and two and getting more than four.

From day one, the opposition coalition's strategy of capturing Putrajaya was based solely on bringing down Najib rather than on building a narrative of what they had done and what they could offer.

But they seriously underestimated Najib's survival instincts and the strategy has gone down the drain. Having failed to dislodge Najib, they are now grasping for a new storyline that, unfortunately, resembles a fairy tale.

Stepping down is the last thing on Najib's mind. Najib is preparing to go the distance, he has started to go on the attack mode and has switched up the we-can-win rhetoric.

There has been an unmistakable turnaround in his political fortunes over the course of the last year. Some think it began after his productive trip to China where the Chinese leaders welcomed him like an old friend and he returned with an armful of investments.

EPU Minister Datuk Rahman Dahlan said Najib often tells his ministers that the strength of the government is not just about domestic policies, it is also about strategic relations with big nations.

"He likes to say that we cannot be isolated, we need to network, to position ourselves as a trading nation and that's where Barisan has the edge and standing," said Rahman.

On the political side, Najib gained a solid footing after a successful Umno general assembly. Everyone could see how the party, especially the three wings, rallied around him.

Najib's tenacity in fighting off Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, said Rahman, went a long way in earning him the respect of his party. The myth that Dr Mahathir is invincible has been debunked.

Rahman said the former Premier's mistake was to misread the mood and thinking of Umno members.

"When he criticised Pak Lah (Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi), we lost several states as well as our two-thirds majority. Then he started going for Najib, but people were already fed-up. They wanted Najib to sort out the 1MDB issue but they did not want another crisis. They didn't want to repeat the mistake of 2008," said the EPU Minister.

Rahman said the other flaw in Dr Mahathir's strategy is expecting the Malays to



Stepping it up: Najib was upbeat during a two-day visit to Terengganu which is regarded as a swing state. He is seen here with Cabinet ministers and Terengganu leaders against a backdrop of Sungai Besut. — Bernama

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Datuk Rahman Dahlan



go along with him in a coalition dominated by DAP.

In hindsight, the RUU355 also turned out to be one of those things that happened for a reason. The government's decision not to take over the RUU355 accomplished more than just resolving an issue that had divided the nation.

It sent the signal that Barisan Nasional is a coalition of consensus, that the partners although unequal in strength had equal say in this critical matter. It was a test of the ruling coalition's bond.

It has been a while since Barisan has been this confident in facing the general election.

Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir has started using the slogan, "retain and regain", which will be one of the rallying calls in the general election. They intend to hold on to what they have and win back seats lost in 2013.

Reports from those who have attended the Umno political retreats in the party's Janda Baik centre said Barisan is poised to win 128 seats but the target is somewhere in the 140-seat zone.

"Najib has steered the economy through a rough patch, he is seen as governing. There are problems to be solved but we are not a failed economy," said a political insider.

For instance, the Malaysian Indian Blueprint that was launched last week is a pivotal signal of his government's commitment to the Indian community.

It is true that in the past, leaders made promises that were not kept but this document will hold the government accountable and form the basis for policies

targeted at the community.

Barisan's first confidence boost came from the landslide victory in the Sarawak election last year. This was followed by the Kuala Kangsar and Sungai Besar by-elections where the margins of win surprised even the Barisan leaders.

The exit of Umno big-guns Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal in mid-2016 shook the party, but by the time the party convened for its annual general assembly, it was clear that their departure had actually pulled the party together rather than apart.

Moreover, the party could not accept the fact that their former leaders had joined forces with DAP and the line of "us versus them" was drawn in the sand.

For a while too, Shafie's potential impact in Sabah was a source of concern. Hence the rumblings for an early state election in Sabah which has now petered out.

"Discussions about a separate state election in Sabah has died down. I think it means the PM is confident Sabah will come along with Barisan," said Rahman.

At the same time, Pakatan Harapan has also stopped boasting about capturing Johor. Without PAS on its side, Pakatan will struggle to capture the Malay seats that it needs in order to win Johor. Pakatan's priority now is to hold on to Selangor and Penang.

For much of last year, Pakatan supporters used social media to paint a picture that the Johor palace had problems with Najib. Instead, it is Dr Mahathir whom the Johor Sultan has problems with.

The significance of states like Sarawak, Sabah and Johor is that they have to fall before Pakatan can capture Putrajaya and the signs are that these three big ones are still with Barisan.

In politics, a party's strength is also a result of how strong or weak the opponent is. Pakatan's hopes of taking Putrajaya were crushed the day PAS was thrown out of the coalition. PAS' strength lies in having a core support and the moral authority it commands among many Malay voters.

Najib played his cards well in befriendng PAS in its moment of need. Who can forget all those solicitous hospital visits to PAS leaders when they were ill?

Malay leaders are very much into the practice of *ziarah*, visiting the sick, infirm and

elderly – it is encouraged in Islam and it has become a part of the Malay culture. But when the Prime Minister makes a high-profile visit to a PAS leader in hospital, it is also very much about politics.

Of late, the two parties have been singing the same song but with different lyrics.

Datuk Seri Hadi Awang said in an interview with *Mingguan Malaysia* that the Malays should vote for a party that defends Islam and that means either PAS or Umno. A couple of days later, Najib told an audience in Terengganu to reject an Opposition that does not want to see the development of Islam.

But those who imagine PAS and Umno have an electoral pact going on, had better think again. The two parties will be going head-to-head in the Malay crescent states of Terengganu, Kelantan and Kedah.

It is no secret that Barisan is closely watching Terengganu and Kedah which have a reputation as swing states. However, Rahman said Najib was upbeat after spending the weekend in Terengganu.

"He has been there so many times, but he told us there was something genuine and special in the air, he could feel the warmth and eagerness," said Rahman.

According to Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Reezal Naina Merican, global events have also enabled Malaysians to view politics and policies in a more balanced light.

Opposition supporters had demanded that Najib step down after his coalition won only 47% of the popular vote in 2013. They look at America and they can now see that one can lose the popular vote by more than two million and yet move into the White House.

In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is planning to implement GST on an even wider scale than Malaysia. India's GST ranges from 5% for items such as cooking oil to 12% for processed goods and 28% for luxury items.

Over in Jakarta, the Christian-Chinese candidate popularly known as Ahok lost in his bid for the Governor's post. The racial and religious overtones that led to his defeat sent out chilling signals.

All this is happening as Malaysia prepares to press the political reset button.

The tide has turned, and Najib is in a bullish mood. The man who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, has had to fight hard to stay on top and he is now on attack mode.