

Dr Mahathir likely to hold on to post beyond 2020

The Star - 21/12/2019 pg. 11

Analysis by Joceline Tan

NINETY-FOUR and going strong – that is how some perceive Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as he prepares to hold on to the hot seat beyond 2020.

The Prime Minister has apparently not discussed his extended term of office with the Pakatan Harapan presidential council nor, according to multiple sources, has he run it by his successor Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Instead, he has ever so casually dropped a nugget here and a nugget there for them to piece together his intentions in the coming year.

An interview with Reuters revealed that he intends to stay on till after the Apec Summit in November next year.

Then, during an official visit to Qatar, he said he needed to resolve problems left behind by the previous administration before he calls it a day.

And in what was seen as a move to keep his successor at arm's length, he also indicated that he could not guarantee who would succeed him.

Well, he is not known as an "old fox" for nothing.

Dr Mahathir's intentions have been met with utter silence on the

part of Anwar.

But those around Dr Mahathir say he is genuinely committed to passing the baton to Anwar.

He recently told a lawyer friend that: "I don't want to leave this world without honouring my word."

The question is whether Anwar and those around him have the patience to wait till Dr Mahathir is ready to go.

There are already rumblings on the PKR ground.

"It has to be in May or else it may never happen," said Unisel vice-chancellor Datuk Prof Dr Redzuan Othman who is a longtime friend of Anwar.

According to Redzuan, the Pakatan presidential council is expected to seek an explanation from Dr Mahathir about the transition date.

The Otai Reformasi group, which is fiercely loyal to Anwar, is also planning a series of protests in the coming year to press for a May transition date.

"Why the need to push (the transition) till after Apec? And after Apec, will there be another extension?" said Otai Reformasi secretary Abdul Razak Ismail.

There is basically a great deal of distrust among the Anwar circle for Dr Mahathir.

"They treat us this way after using Anwar's name and our party logo to win the general election. It is still the same Mahathir of 20 years ago, he only changed his shirt," said Abdul Razak.

But is there anyone in the presidential council who would dare to bell the cat, to tell Dr Mahathir that he has to stick to the May transition date?

It seems like even Anwar, who meets Dr Mahathir on a regular basis, has not dared to broach the subject.

Moreover, Anwar is politically in a weaker situation than a year ago, especially after the protracted power struggle with his deputy president Datuk Seri Azmin Ali and their party's disastrous national congress earlier this month.

The public perception is that if Anwar cannot control his party, how is he going to run the country?

Moreover, DAP, which has been Anwar's most consistent ally, seems to be going along with Dr Mahathir.

At the recent Penang DAP convention, secretary-general Lim Guan Eng told his party to accept that the transfer of power will only happen after the Apec Summit.

It was a powerful endorsement of Dr Mahathir's intention to play host to the Apec Summit.

DAP holds the deciding card by virtue of its numbers in Parliament. It is unlikely Anwar would succeed in pressing for a May power transition without DAP's support.

The other thing is that Anwar is once again battling allegations of a sexual nature from yet another aide.

He has condemned the allegations by Muhammed Yusoff Rawther as "politics at its worst".

It is unclear how this case will develop but Muhammed Yusoff comes from a well-known family in Penang where his grandfather was a giant in consumer activism.

Muhammed Yusoff's lawyer Haniff Khatri Abdulla also happens to be the personal lawyer of Dr Mahathir and it has spawned all sorts of conspiracy theories.

Haniff's effort to disassociate the case from his most famous client has failed to dampen the coffee shop chatter.

Muhammed Yusoff also underwent a lie detector test at Bukit Aman earlier this week and his lawyer's conclusion that he is "more than satisfied" with the test speaks volumes.

Political analyst Khaw Veon Szu said Anwar's political troubles may have strengthened Dr Mahathir's case to stay on beyond May 2020.

"It has diminished his moral authority to fix the transition date," said Khaw.

However, all these, including allegations of murder thrown at Datuk Seri Najib Razak, will only add to the uncertainties enveloping the country.

The former premier made a religious oath or *sumpah laknat* yesterday after Friday prayers to deny the claim by death row prisoner Azilah Hadri that he ordered the killing of Altantuya Shaariibuu.

Surprisingly, the outlandish allegations did not cause social media to go into overdrive, a sign of the political fatigue out there.

But Najib has amassed a huge following via his Bosku adventures and this new narrative is certain to bring out the crowds when he goes on a roadshow to rubbish the allegations.

Another year of high politics lies ahead.

What is certain is that Dr Mahathir will still be up there in 2020 but the uncertainty over whether Anwar will eventually take over will continue to dominate Malaysia's politics.

The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of The Star.