

# Anwar and PM – who will blink first?

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Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

Speculation of a brewing mutiny against the Prime Minister refuses to go away despite Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim categorically denying such a plot.

WHEN Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim arrived at Unisel to give a talk earlier this week, he was introduced as the “eighth prime minister of Malaysia.”

There was deafening applause from the floor.

The man making the introduction was Unisel vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Mohammad Redzuan Othman who has been devoted to Anwar since their undergraduate years in Universiti Malaya.

Anwar basked in the adulation. But it was a different story a day later when he was informed of several banners that had appeared overnight in the city, lauding him as the eighth prime minister while asking Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to step down.

He immediately asked his party officials to remove the banners.

Just as Dr Mahathir is finding it tough to be prime minister the second time around, Anwar is finding it to be a case of so close yet so far away.

He is surely aware of the joke that he might be “PM-in-waiting forever”.

Moreover, all eyes tend to turn on him each time there are allegations of a plot against Dr Mahathir.

That was what happened when news of a potential vote of no confidence in Parliament started making the rounds.

At around the same time, a list of MPs said to have pledged their allegiance to Anwar went viral.

There were 101 names on the list, which suggests that Anwar is only 12 names short of a simple majority in Parliament. However, it was hard to take the list seriously

because it included some Umno MPs who had jumped to Bersatu.

“There are people coming to see Anwar, to pledge allegiance, to ask him to do something. But he is not entertaining what they say.

“My boss will wait. He intends to hold on to his end of the (succession) agreement, and he believes that Dr Mahathir will keep his word,” said Farhash Wafa Salvador, Perak PKR chief and a close aide of Anwar.

As Farhash pointed out, it was not a personal agreement but one made between Dr Mahathir and Pakatan Harapan.

Of course, Anwar gets wind of what the Bersatu leaders think of him and is also aware of attempts to block his ascent.

But the post-Sungai Buloh Anwar seems more mellowed, patient and rather sanguine about life and politics.

“He does not want to get distracted by the political noise that goes on between him and Dr Mahathir,” said Farhash.

Visitors to his Jalan Gasing office say he is relaxed and wants to go with the flow.

He is very active on Twitter, especially on national policies, although it must be quite a struggle to ignore the provocative tweets of his estranged deputy president Datuk Seri Azmin Ali.

Relations between him and Azmin have broken down irrevocably although both of them held hands and smiled for the camera when Anwar visited Azmin after

the latter’s surgery. Some have described the occasion as an Oscar-worthy moment.

There were calls at the Bersatu AGM for Dr Mahathir to serve a full term, which Anwar chose to ignore.

Anwar is playing the long game. He can afford to wait or, to put it delicately, he is 71 and Dr Mahathir is 93.

Most of all, Anwar understands all too well the prime minister’s powers of incumbency. He tasted the full blast of it in 1998 and has no wish to experience it again.

To be fair to Anwar, talk of a potential vote of no confidence actually started after Dr Mahathir began recruiting ex-Umno MPs.

Speculation reached a crescendo after the Prime Minister struck an understanding of support with PAS leaders.

It is understood that Dr Mahathir has also been meeting individual MPs to sniff out where they stand and at least two Amanah leaders are believed to support Dr Mahathir.

When the Prime Minister made an official visit to the Defence Ministry last Friday, the perception was that Defence Minister Mohamad Sabu was one of them.

As everyone knows, all prime ministers want a strong hold on the Defence and Home ministries.

Despite denials of a showdown in Parliament, the coming session will be closely watched.

Any attempt to move a vote of no confidence has to be done with all the numbers in hand. Otherwise, it will be an instantaneous death by

numbers for the person behind it.

And if the session passes without drama, the next potential flashpoint is the Cabinet reshuffle that is expected to take place sometime in May.

A reshuffle after only one year is actually too soon for any government. But it has become a necessity for Dr Mahathir, given the host of complaints about some of his ministers and deputy ministers.

The complaints range from sheer incompetence to their inability to speak decent Bahasa Malaysia.

The feedback from some senior government servants is that the current government is reminiscent of the time when Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was in charge.

Even Tun Daim Zainuddin, the man widely perceived as the power behind the scenes, said in an interview with *Sin Chew Daily* that some of the ministers are “L licence drivers” whereas Dr Mahathir is used to the F1 circuit.

Dr Mahathir’s recruitment of ex-Umno MPs is not only about the numbers game, but also to give him more choice in the event of a Cabinet reshuffle.

He needs experienced hands, like Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed, to connect with the Malay base as well as deal with the civil service.

It is no secret that some Pakatan government figures have encountered problems with the civil service. There is still some distrust and these leaders are paying the price for bad-mouthing everything to do with the government during

their years in the opposition.

There is even gossip in Putrajaya that a non-Malay minister had tried to resign out of frustration.

The impending reshuffle will happen at the mid-point of Dr Mahathir’s two-year tenure.

As such, there is an expectation that the reshuffle will pave the way for a succession Cabinet.

But strangely enough, no one is expecting Anwar to replace Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail as the No.2.

Instead, the gossip is that Dr Mahathir is eyeing Datuk Seri Azmin Ali for the No.2 job or even as the second Deputy Prime Minister.

That will be controversial and could spark off a showdown.

“Why should Mahathir rock the boat with something like that? He is the captain, he wants the ship to sail on. Rock the boat and the captain may sink with the boat,” said Minaq Jingo, a photojournalist and longtime admirer of Dr Mahathir.

By the time Dr Mahathir is ready to reshuffle his Cabinet, his party should have at least 27 MPs, thanks to the crossovers. It will strengthen his hand to do what is needed.

But the man to watch in the coming months is actually Azmin.

If Dr Mahathir is Anwar’s biggest threat, then Azmin is the second biggest threat.

The Economic Affairs Minister is poised for bigger things on account of his experience, age and personality.

The three of them will be the key players in the coming months.